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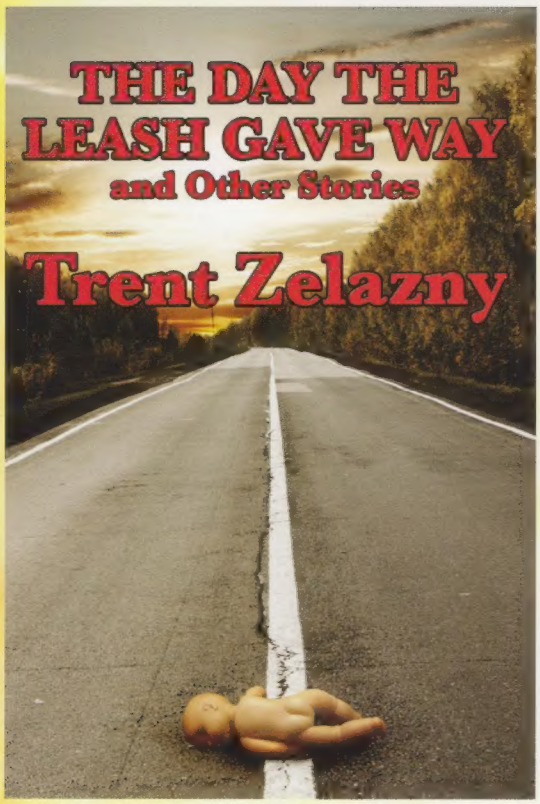

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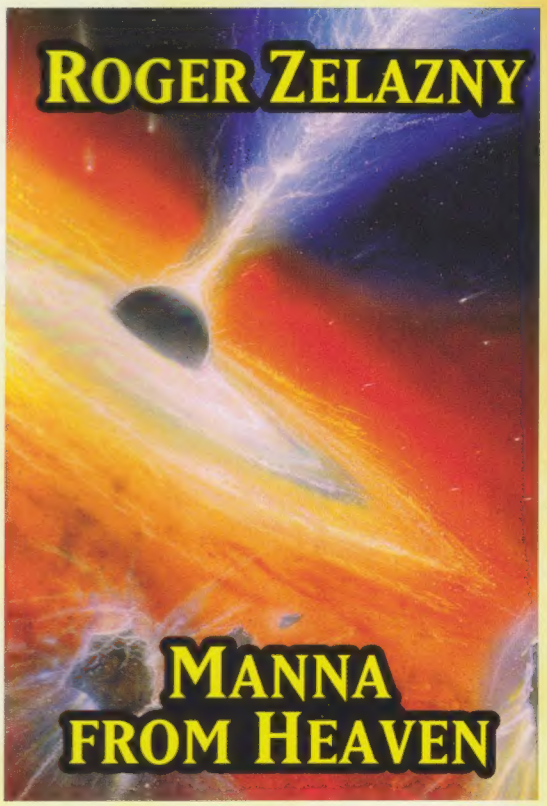

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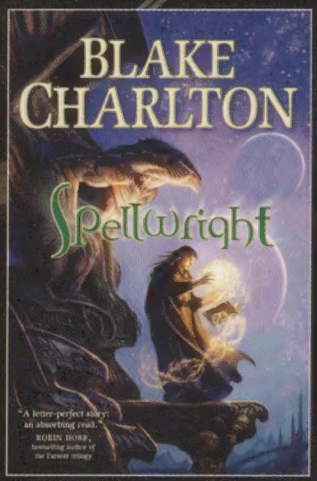
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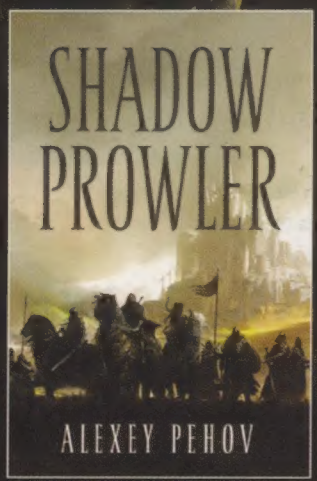

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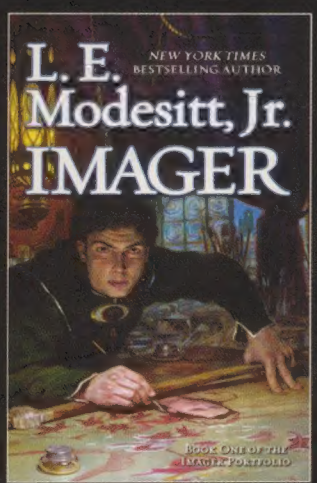

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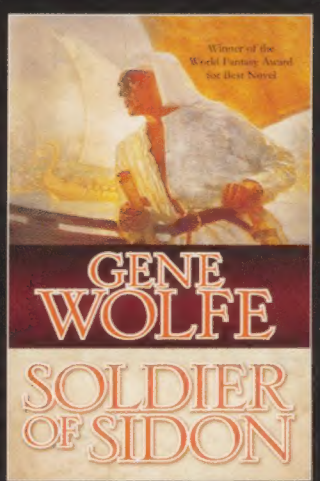

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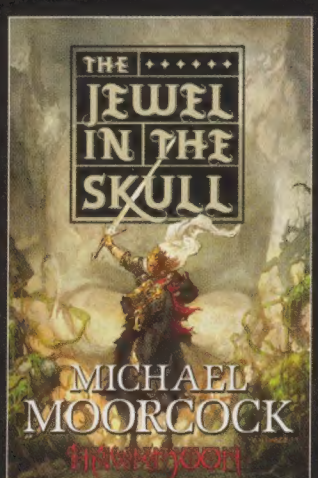

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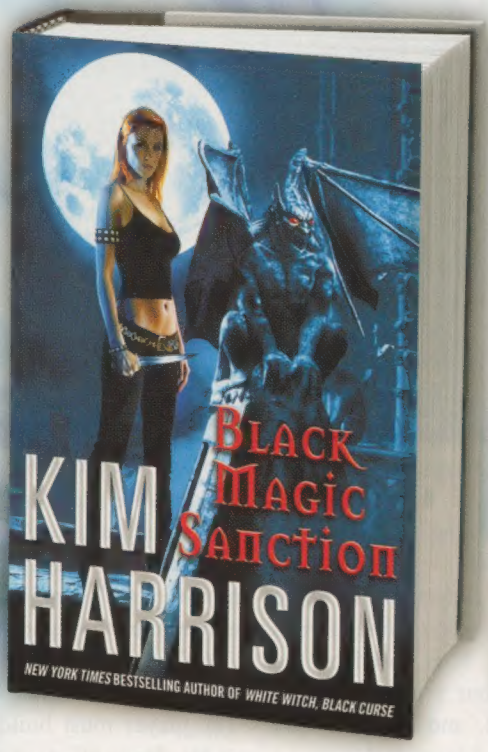

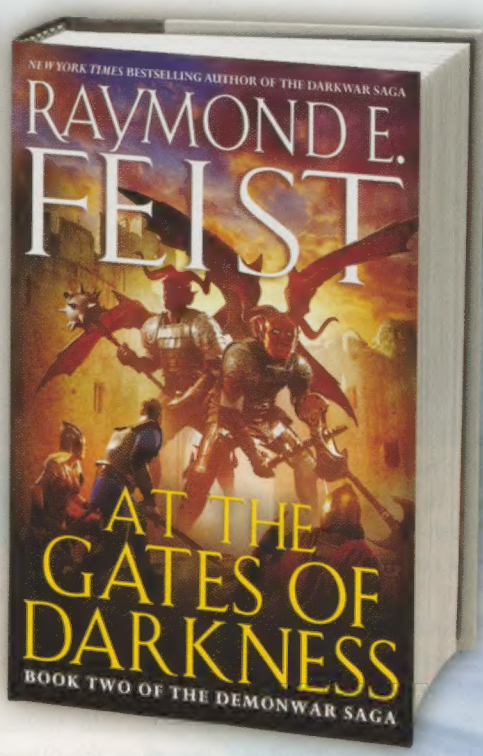
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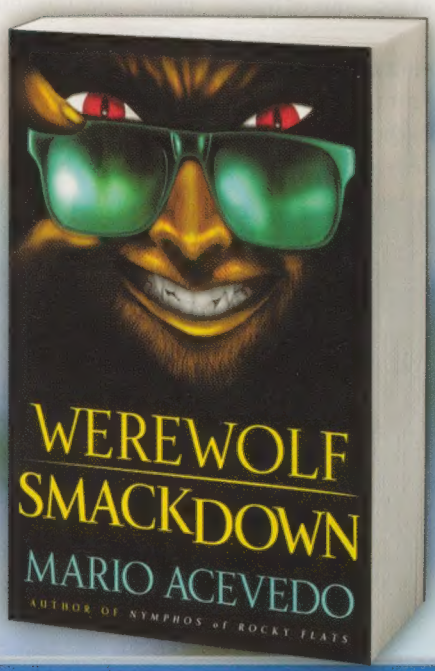

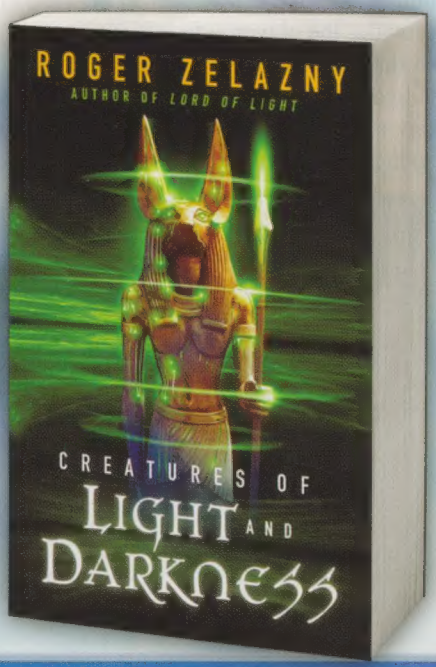

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Games

Matt Staggs
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***Heroes of Gaia*, by Snail Game. ESRB Rating: none, Free to play, Formats available: Any flash-player-installed web browser. Format reviewed: Firefox browser**

Heroes of Gaia by Snail Game is a free online browser-based game in which the player creates a kingdom to rule alongside thousands of other players in a rich medieval fantasy world. Unlike the standard massive multiplayer online roleplaying game, *Heroes of Gaia* provides the player with an overview of the kingdom and resources at hand in which to do battle. This gives the game a strategy element along with the resource management aspect that is so popular in most business-simulation games. However, never forget that the main objective of the game is survival and growth of the kingdom.

Heroes of Gaia is played in the same world as the popular video game *Heroes of Might and Magic*. It is based on the conflict among the four primary races—Human, Elf, Undead, and Orc. To start the game, the player chooses to become a member of—and to fight for—one of these four races.

The game begins with the player establishing a home castle. From this castle the player develops new buildings and begins amassing resources. It is with these buildings and resources that the player begins to build armies and recruit heroes. The player then uses these new forces of heroes and armies to set out on epic quests to slay monsters and engage in battle against enemy armies throughout the kingdom.

Of course there is the defensive side of the game that must be maintained also. The player must build defenses for their castle, forge alliances with other players, create and join guilds, and manage their resources for an attack.

The player's characters and heroes also play a very important part in the game, including vital roles in the war. This is where the roleplaying game element comes to the fore. Skill points provide the leveling up system that most gamers are familiar with. This allows for upgrades to be made to the characters. The player can also research new skills and add arms to their arsenal. There is also a large equipment system, equipment-forging system, and an equipment-besetting system. Truly the game play is limitless.

Heroes of Gaia uses a continuous game world, which means that even when the player is offline, their kingdom is still in operation. Castles will continue to build up resources, armies will continue to be trained, and heroes that were sent out on missions still carry out their directed orders. This makes *Heroes of Gaia* a fun and

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addictive game, and the player can log on from any computer with an internet connection to check the status of their kingdom, and to send out new marching orders to be carried out at a later time.

So how can Snail Game provide such an immersive online game that people would actually enjoy playing for free? The company allows players to purchase top-up points for their game account. These top-up points can be used as perks and bonuses to assist with game play. That is not to say that the only way to have fun is to spend money on this free game. Snail Game gives away bonus gifts on a regular basis, and players can earn bonuses by referring friends and by advertising the game on their personal sites. Visit **http://www.heroesofgaia.com** to start your quest.

***Duels of the Planeswalkers: Expansion* for *Magic: The Gathering*. Stainless Games, ESRB Rating: TEEN, Formats available: XBOX 360, available 2010 for PlayStation 3, PC. Format reviewed Xbox 360**

Magic: The Gathering is the world's premier trading card game and has been going strong since 1993. The epic game was recently released on the Xbox console through the Xbox LIVE Arcade, and the online community has continued to grow. Now video game fans and *Magic: The Gathering* fans worldwide can play with new decks, experience never-before-seen challenges, and battle new adversaries with the first expansion for *Magic: The Gathering—Duels of the Planeswalkers*. The game play is exactly like the original card game but without the hassle of buying, trading, and collecting cards. *Duels of the Planeswalkers* expansion has added several fantastic new features including expanded Two-Headed Giant co-op levels, new decks, new challenges, and new foes.

This expansion picks up where the original left off, with three new playable decks, including Tezzeret's "Relics of Doom" Planeswalker deck. It also expands the game with unlockable cards for each of the eight original decks and adds three new puzzle challenge levels with a new level of difficulty.

In the new single-player campaign, the player once again faces Sarkhan Vol and Jace Beleren. After besting them, the player is then able to unlock the new Planeswalker decks. The most significant addition to the game that this new expansion provides is to allow the player to duel *Magic*'s iconic dragon Planeswalker Nicol Bolas as the final combatant. Nicol Bolas is the most powerful of the Elder Dragons and is considered to be the most powerful Planeswalker of the Multiverse. The dragon wields a deck packed with many of the most powerful blue, black, and red spells found in *Magic: The Gathering*.

For those who are new to *Magic: The Gathering: Duels of the Planeswalkers* provides a step-by-step learning process that will have the player slinging cards like a pro in no time. The learning does not stop with the tutorial, either; *Duels of the Planeswalkers* will continue to provide hints to the player until no longer needed.

Of course, the draw of *Magic: The Gathering* in general is the competitive multiplayer community. This online community continues to create matches and provides ranking of experienced players. As with the primary game the expansion cards are available to use in the multiplayer arena and this includes the unlockable cards. For many players these additions to their deck are completely worth the cost of the download. There are multiplayer levels from one-on-one up to four-player competitions including the Two-Headed Giant co-op levels, which allows for two-against-two battles.

The bottom line on *Duels of the Planeswalkers* expansion is that the addition of the new Red-Green and Blue-White decks, along with new cards to add to existing decks, make this downloadable content a great value for all *Magic: The Gathering* players.

Magic: The Gathering: Duels of the Planeswalkers is available on the Xbox LIVE Arcade for 800 Microsoft points. The expansion, reviewed here, is available for an additional 400 Microsoft points.

Tony Sims is a contributor to *Wired* magazine's GeekDad blog, where he primarily reviews television, gadgets, and video games. If you would like to contact Tony about a potential review, he can be reached at: **deepseven@gmail.com**.

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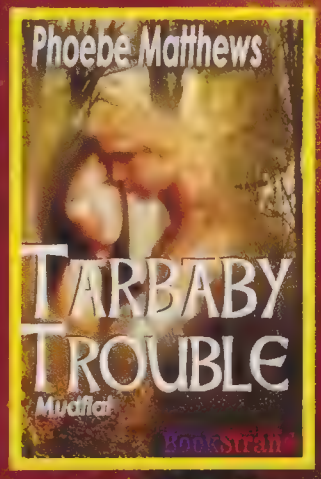

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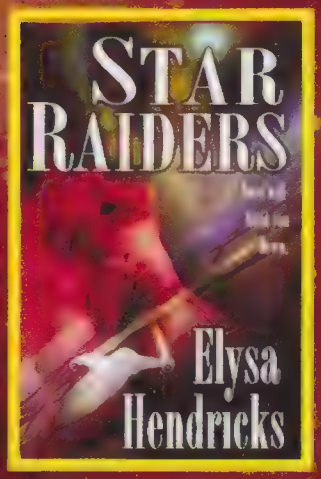

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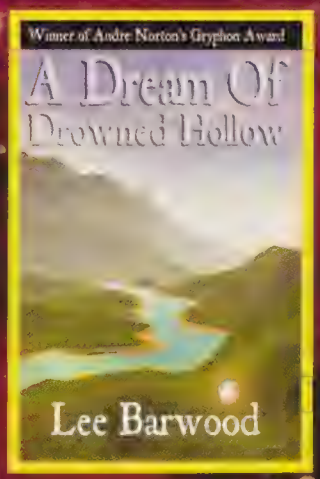

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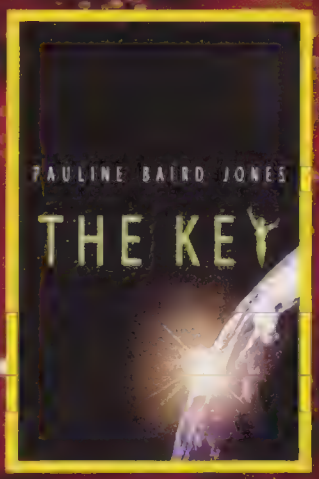

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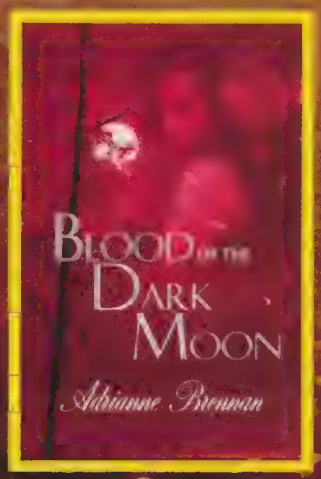

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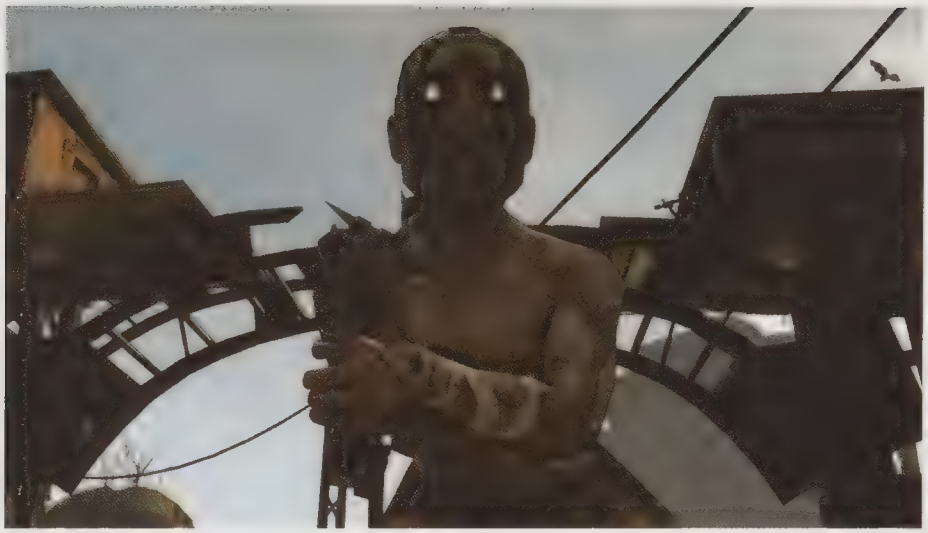


***Borderlands*, Gearbox Software/2K Games, ESRB: Mature, $59.99, Formats available: PC, Playstation 3, Xbox 360. Format reviewed: Xbox 360**

Borderlands is a cheerfully anarchic take on the science fiction shooter genre that incorporates some basic roleplaying elements for an action-packed gaming experience. Players take control of one of four characters—Mordecai, a hunter; Brick, a berserker; Roland, a soldier; or Lilith, a magic-wielding siren—on a mission to uncover the mysterious "vault," a legendary repository of ancient alien technology and riches hidden somewhere on the harsh desert planet of Pandora.

A failed colony, Pandora's landscape bears more of a resemblance to the post-apocalyptic ruins of a *Mad Max* movie than anything else, and is just as dangerous. It seems like nearly everyone has a use for a stranger who knows his or her way around a gun, and players spend most of their time running and gunning from point A to point B and back again. This comprises the majority of the game's roleplaying elements, and really, as such, it is rather threadbare. There are no dialogue trees and most character interactions begin and end with a hectic exchange of gunfire.

This isn't to say that *Borderlands* isn't fun, though. All of the wild shootouts and looting can be surprisingly addictive, and the minimalist roleplaying aspect can be a blessing for those players who don't have a lot of gaming time to devote to the intricacies of a *Dragon Age*, or perhaps more appropriately, a *Fallout 3*. Although *Borderlands* is a lot of fun on its own, it is a game best played with friends. Up to four players can join in co-op mode to battle Pandora's various baddies, including acid-spitting mutant wolf creatures called Skags, giant insects, and various and sundry gun-toting homicidal maniacs.

Speaking of guns, one of *Borderland*'s biggest selling points is that it features an obscene number of firearms, from submachine guns that shoot exploding bullets or acid rounds to sniper rifles that not only do an awesome amount of damage, but also have a chance of setting unlucky enemies on fire. Even within these broader categories individual guns offer considerable variation such as greater or lesser accuracy, different magazine sizes and reload rates, and the inclusion of scopes and other accessories. Guns are absolutely everywhere on Pandora: enemies drop them, lockers and chests more often than not contain them, even piles of Skag poop sometimes conceal them. That's not even including the vending machines located in most settlements that buy and sell guns, grenades, and ammo. It is easy to get attached to one gun or another, but there's almost always a better one just around the corner. Fortunately, characters can carry a hefty amount of gear, so a penchant for hanging on to favorite weapons need not be an impediment.

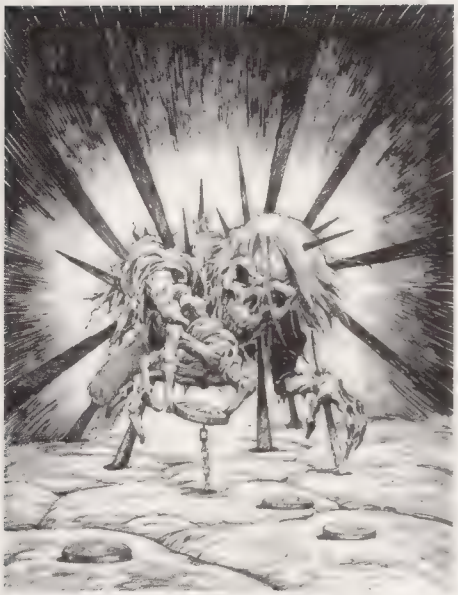
Character advancement is a fairly straight-forward process. Players are awarded experience points for killing enemies and completing tasks, and when enough points are accumulated the character levels up. Each character has three separate skill trees that lump related (mostly combat-oriented) skills together, and players can pick and choose from these to customize the character in a way that best suits their playing style. The four characters already come prepackaged with certain strengths and weaknesses, so this customization is more or less tweaking an existing build rather than creating something new from whole cloth. At any rate, should a player decide that he doesn't like the way that he's spent his skill points, it's easy to reset them via Pandora's many "New-U" way-stations. Players can also change their characters' names and appearances, as well as save their game at any point. The New-U stations are also where characters reappear after falling in battle, and thankfully, all of their gear survives the trip too. While the player's journey eventually ends with the discovery of the fabled vault, what the players find may surprise them. Happily, thanks to the game's random encounter generation system, the game itself offers numerous opportunities for replay.

If *Borderlands* has one strength, it is that it doesn't take itself all that seriously, and seems to encourage players to do the same. This attitude is felt in every aspect of the game experience, from its comic book cell-shaded graphics to its text, full of humorous references to movies, books, and television shows. Players who want a truly immersive roleplaying experience should look elsewhere, but action-oriented gamers who prefer more explosions and less exposition will find that Pandora feels like home.

***The Dungeon Alphabet*, Michael Curtis, Goodman Games, hardcover, 48 pp., $9.99, ISBN: 978-0-984-11276-0**

Tabletop gamers looking for a little creative spice to bring to their ongoing campaigns or even a short and sweet way to develop a quick one-off adventure on the fly should give Goodman Games's new *The Dungeon Alphabet* a try. Encouraging readers to look back to the early days of the hobby when dungeons weren't necessarily enswathed in meta-plot and expected to maintain some geophysical and ecological consistency and, instead, were places where reality went a bit wild, this fantastic book is just the thing to bring a little bit of whimsy to the gaming table.

Presented as an alphabetical primer, each letter of the alphabet is used to introduce one concept often encountered on dungeon crawls, such as "Doors" or "Ver-



min." The entry then is accompanied by a paragraph or two of text that encourages the gamemaster to think more creatively (read: more lethally) about the subject, and ends with a chart of randomly generated features to vex, maim, or generally confuse hapless dungeon explorers. In the opinion of this reviewer, these charts are worth every penny of the book's cover price. Gamemasters, especially those of a certain age and somewhat more pressed for time than they were in their youth, live and die by their charts, and the ones in *The Dungeon Alphabet* can be used to generate scads of traps, mysterious effects, and random rooms galore.

It is entirely possible that a gamemaster armed with this handy book plus a good list of random monsters could whip up an entirely satisfactory dungeon in just an hour or so. From "Altars" to "Zowie!" there are enough ideas in here to keep players on their toes for many, many sessions to come. Illustrated by some of the hobby's greatest classic artists, including Erol Otus, Jeff Easley, and Jim Holloway, among others, and full of system-neutral content usable for any fantasy roleplaying game, *The Dungeon Alphabet* is a strong contender for inclusion in any gamer's library.

***Pathfinder Roleplaying Game: Bestiary*, Paizo Publishing, hardcover, 320 pp., $39.99, ISBN: 978-1-60125-183-1**

Paizo Publishing expands its *Pathfinder Roleplaying Game* line with the publication of its second core book: *The Pathfinder Bestiary*, a collection of over 300 monsters. Although the beasts included here are designed for use with *Pathfinder*, the *Bestiary*, like all Pathfinder products, is entirely compatible with the 3.5 edition of the *Dungeons & Dragons* core rules.

Arranged in alphabetical order, each monster gets its own page of content, including a description, gaming statistics, and a full-color illustration. Any special abilities unique to the creature is included in its listing, while special abilities common to many monsters are described in the appendix under a section titled "Universal Monster Rules," rather than being reprinted numerous times over. Also, for easy reference, each monster's name is followed by three colored icons, a coded system that indicates the monster's subtype (for example, "Animal" or "Undead"), home terrain ("jungle"), and preferred climate ("tropical"), making choosing appropriate monsters for any given campaign a snap. Finally, each monster has a stated experience point value, making it easier to reward them at the end of a session.

The majority of the monsters in the *Bestiary* will seem familiar to veteran gamers as the majority of them have previously appeared in Wizards of the Coast's *Monster Manuals* or, in some instances, other open-content third-party products. However, this seeming familiarity can be misleading, as Paizo's designers have imprinted even the most run-of-the-mill dungeon denizens with their own unique stamp. Bugbears, for instance, are described as sociopathic monsters not unlike serial killers, solitary sadists who relish in bringing a maximum of pain and fear to their human victims. Female trolls, it is noted, are devoted mothers who raise their young in collective warrens, while male trolls are intensively territorial loners who battle constantly with their fellows for control of contested territories.

Imaginative flourishes like these are common in the *Bestiary*, and prove that a monster is far more than just a string of numbers. None of this is carved in stone, and gamemasters are free to ignore these concepts in favor of their own. In any case, The *Bestiary* comes with easy-to-follow guidelines for use in creating new monsters, so buyers need not be limited to what is included within. The *Bestiary* is an excellent product, a worthy companion volume to the *Pathfinder Roleplaying Game Core Rulebook* that manages to supply gamemasters with classic creatures in a fresh, new way. ☙

Matt Staggs is *Realms of Fantasy*'s games reviewer and also a regular contributor of fiction reviews. When he's not reading, writing or gaming, Matt enjoys spending time with his wife and surfing the web. If you'd like to send Matt a book or game for review, contact him at **mattormeg@gmail.com**.

Resa Nelson

The Success of Paranormal Activity Rides the Coattails of a Multitude of Ghostly TV Series

The most exciting rags-to-riches movie success of 2009 was *Paranormal Activity,* a faux documentary about a haunting that scared the nation silly. According to *Entertainment Weekly,* first-time director Oren Peli made the film for a measly investment of $11,000, and at press time *Paranormal Activity* had earned over $100 million at the box office. Like 1999's *The Blair Witch Project,* it's a blockbuster that feels fresh and appears to break new ground.

But if you've watched any of today's TV series about ghosts, this movie actually covers familiar territory. In *Paranormal Activity,* actors Micah Sloat and Katie Featherston (like the actors in *Blair Witch,* the characters have the same names as the actors) portray a couple living together in a house where they hear strange noises. Sloat sets up a camera in the bedroom when he and Featherston sleep, with the intent of filming evidence of whatever is going bump in the night.

"Ah," you might say, especially if you're familiar with any of today's reality/documentary TV shows that explore the paranormal. You're likely to know that setting up a camera with night vision is standard procedure when it comes to hunting ghosts.

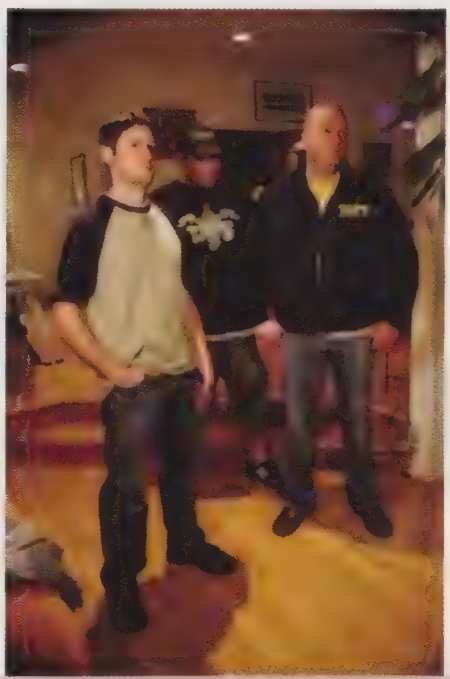
Later in the movie, Sloat is warned against using a Ouija board. Again, you might nod in agreement. Unless you're with an experienced group of ghost hunters, using a Ouija board can open unseen doors that had best remained shut.

And when Sloat decides to sprinkle baby powder on the floor in case something walks through the powder and leaves footprints, you might remember seeing this practice used on a reality TV series and agree with Micah that this is a good strategy.

In other words, anyone familiar with ghost TV will notice that *Paranormal Activity* is a movie that understands the ghost-hunting world quite well. As a result, the moviegoers most likely to be scared are the ones who have never seen real ghost hunters in action on TV. And while *The Blair Witch Project* may have been the catalyst that opened the floodgates for reality paranormal TV series, the real groundwork was laid decades ago.

In 1984, another blockbuster movie called *Ghost Busters* had everyone singing, "I ain't 'fraid of no ghosts." A mere twenty-five years ago, audiences howled with laughter at the sight of scientists (played by Bill Murray, Harold Ramis, Dan Aykroyd, and Ernie Hudson) firing proton guns and collecting ectoplasmic residue. But the catalyst for the *Ghost Busters* movies was fact, not fantasy.

Last October, Dan Aykroyd and his father, Peter Aykroyd, appeared on NBC's *Today Show* to promote their nonfiction book, *A History of Ghosts: The True Story of Séances, Mediums, Ghosts, and Ghostbusters,* which blends personal experience with the history of the spiritualist craze that began in the mid-1800s. Peter Aykroyd grew up in a family that held séances and ultimately became the real-life inspiration for the *Ghost Busters* movies.



Today, ghost hunting has gone mainstream, with over twenty ghost-themed series currently airing on TV. Although it hasn't been long since everyone laughed at the thought of tracking spirits, real ghost-hunting groups have cropped up all over the world. Probably the most well-known and respected is The Atlantic Paranormal Society (TAPS), founded by Jason Hawes and Grant Wilson and made famous by the series *Ghost Hunters,* airing on the Syfy Channel since 2004. Each episode begins with a TAPS team traveling at its own expense to a site where people believe they're being haunted. The goal is to try to find a rational explanation and debunk the haunting.

The charm of *Ghost Hunters* is the down-to-earth appeal of leaders Jason and Grant, who work by day as plumbers for Roto-Rooter. Their experience as plumbers makes it easy for them to diagnose a "haunted" house as one that needs a little fixing up. In some investigations, they've been quick to explain how a toilet that flushes by itself at 2:00 a.m. or water faucets that mysteriously turn themselves on simply need to have a part replaced.

Setting the benchmark for ghost-hunting shows, TAPS uses cameras, digital recorders, electro-magnetic field (EMF) detectors, and other equipment. Typically, the first step is to meet the owner or representative (of the house, restaurant, hotel, lighthouse, ship, or other site being investigated) and walk through the property to determine exactly where the ghostly events have taken place in the past. Just like Micah in *Paranormal Activity,* the TAPS team sets up cameras with the hope of capturing visual evidence of anything out of the ordinary. Sometimes TAPS members will set up additional equipment, such as motion detectors or an audio recorder.

Once everything is in place, it's lights

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out. The concept is that it's easier to detect paranormal activity in the dark, just like it's easier to see a flashlight beam in pitch black than in full daylight. TAPS members then spend time in different rooms, usually armed with audio recorders (to capture the voice of a ghost that isn't audible to the naked ear) and EMF detectors (to identify spikes that can indicate the presence of a ghost). After each investigation, TAPS evaluates all recorded results and determines if the property is haunted.

For example, TAPS members have explained that high EMF levels can cause people to feel as if they're being watched by an invisible presence. Computers, power lines, and electronic devices can send the EMF levels in a house sky high. Although their priority is to debunk, when TAPS captures hard evidence that can't be explained away they will admit the building is haunted. But they can't be fooled easily. On one case at a "haunted" restaurant, they uncovered hidden speakers and other devices that were being used to simulate ghostly activity.

The success of *Ghost Hunters* has spawned two sister series on the Syfy Channel. *Ghost Hunters International* follows the adventures of a second group of TAPS members as they travel to the most haunted sites around the globe. The newest addition, *Ghost Hunters Academy,* focuses on TAPS veterans Steve Gonsalves and Dave Tango as they supervise five fledgling ghost busters who applied for the opportunity to train with TAPS.

One of the earliest paranormal reality series on TV is *Scariest Places on Earth,* hosted by *The Exorcist*'s Linda Blair and narrated by *Poltergeist*'s Zelda Rubinstein. Reruns have aired most recently on the Syfy Channel and Chiller. It's probably no coincidence that *Scariest Places* began airing in 2000, hot on the heels of the success of *The Blair Witch Project* and borrowing that movie's in-your-face technique of extreme close-ups on screaming participants. Each episode focuses on one family exploring a location known to be haunted. Like *Ghost Hunters International,* episodes take place worldwide, often at famous places like the castle of Vlad the Impaler, the inspiration for Dracula. In the dead of night, the spooky history of the property is revealed, each family member dons a camera aimed at his or her face, and they're separated and placed in different rooms, jumping at every unexpected sound. *Scariest Places on Earth* exhibits none of the thought or care that goes into TAPS investigations. Instead, it seems aimed at *Blair Witch* fans looking for a good fright.

In the realm of network television, CBS has found success with two series based on women who communicate with the dead: *Ghost Whisperer* and *Medium.* The first is a fictional series starring Jennifer Love Hewitt, but the latter is based on real-life medium Allison DuBois (played by Patricia Arquette) and her experience helping police solve crimes. The strength of *Medium* is its savvy blend of the paranormal with everyday life. We witness Allison's prophetic dreams and watch the mystery in each episode unfold. At the same time, we see

Allison as a wife and mother struggling to balance her daily schedule just like millions of other American women. But if you want to see the nonfiction version of real mediums in action, there are plenty of options on cable TV.

On the Biography Channel, *Psychic Investigators* showcases crimes that baffled police to a point where they agreed—often reluctantly and as a last-ditch effort—to ask a psychic for help. Episodes include reenactments of criminal investigations, detailing how the police encountered roadblocks as well as explaining how and why they decided to employ a psychic. Each criminal case uses the help of one psychic. Because the cases take place throughout the United States, several different psychics located across the country participate in the series. *Psychic Investigators* provides an opportunity to witness the different ways in which psychics work and how their individual abilities impact the case. Some are mediums who travel to crime scenes with detectives and claim to communicate directly with murder and accident victims. When mediums unearth

new evidence that helps solve the crime, detectives often transform from cynics into believers in the paranormal.

Psychic Witness on the Investigation Discovery Channel is very similar to *Psychic Investigators* in premise and format. The main difference seems to be that the psychics assisting police tend to work remotely from home instead of traveling to the crime scene. They provide information by phone or sometimes via objects they receive that help them reveal details that assist the police in solving the case.

Most recently airing on truTV, *Haunting Evidence* is about a modern-day *Mod Squad* who specializes in communicating with ghosts in order to acquire a new lead on a criminal case. Psychic profiler Carla Baron, medium John J. Oliver, and paranormal investigator Patrick Burns join forces to investigate cold cases. Baron and Oliver visit different locations associated with the same crime in order to glean information independent of one another, but they eventually compare notes. Burns documents the investigation, using the same type of equipment used by TAPS and other ghost-hunting groups. By the end of each episode, the crime isn't solved, but the team provides new information to the police: for example, a sketch of a suspect or new details about the crime. One high-profile case involved traveling to Alabama and Aruba in the footsteps of Natalee Holloway, the high school teen who went missing on the last day of a school trip to Aruba. In an episode that first aired in June 2007, the *Haunting Evidence* team revealed what they believed happened to Holloway. About seven months later, the prime suspect's unintentional confession, filmed by a hidden camera as part of a Netherlands journalist's investigation, was released. Although not a 100 percent match with the findings of the *Haunting Evidence* team, the hidden camera confession very closely parallels their theory of what happened to Holloway.

Other reality TV series focus simply on mediums and their ability to contact spirits. On the Biography Channel, each episode of *Psychic Kids* invites a new group of kids to the equivalent of group therapy and boot camp for psychics. Each child or teen already has specific psychic skills. Like Haley Joel Osment's character in *The Sixth Sense*, many of them see dead people. Most often, the kids have spent their lives feeling alone and isolated because they don't want to reveal the truth about themselves. Their families and friends don't know about their ability, except for one or both parents. Paranormal experts such as medium Chip Coffey and Dr. Lisa Miller establish an environment where psychic kids can meet others like themselves and then work together to explore a place known to be haunted, which often requires working through their fear of ghosts. By the end of each episode, the kids feel stronger and happier and go home knowing they have new friends who understand what it's like to be a psychic kid.

More traditional shows about mediums include *John Edward Cross Country* on Women's Entertainment (We TV) and *Lisa Williams: Voices from the Other Side* on Lifetime. John Edward's show is taped in front of an audience, and he zones in on specific members

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with messages from their dead relatives and friends. He delivers no-holds-barred messages and doesn't hesitate to disagree with an audience member who claims not to understand the message. Many times he'll suggest that the audience member talk to family members or do research to unearth the meaning of a message that initially makes no sense. Edward or his producers typically follow up with many of the people he reads. Sometimes they're able to discover an important meaning to messages they originally didn't understand and sometimes these messages remain a mystery.

Lisa Williams is a Brit who seems to have inherited her abilities from her grandmother, who was also a medium. This series is a combination of scheduled individual readings held in her office and spontaneous readings that Williams gives when she's out and about, whether walking down the street, getting a cup of coffee, or shopping for new clothes. While Edward says spirits communicate with him through symbols, Williams hears them speaking loud and clear and doesn't hesitate to imitate their personalities, which usually results in her clients' jaws dropping in astonishment at her accuracy in capturing the essence of their loved ones. Although many people believe that all mediums are nothing more than charlatans—and it's a good bet that many people who claim to be psychic are—both Edward and Williams have given specific information on many occasions to people who said they'd never shared the information with anyone.

Another sub-genre of today's paranormal TV series includes the telling of good old-fashioned ghost stories. Three of these series air on the Biography Channel: *Ghostly Encounters, Celebrity Ghost Stories,* and *Haunted History*.

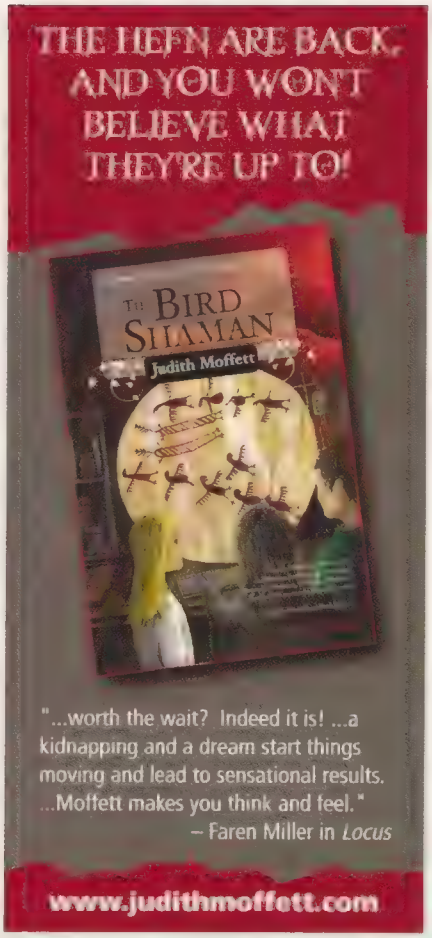
Ghostly Encounters is a Canadian TV series featuring everyday people talking about their paranormal experiences. Each episode tells the stories of a few individuals, intercutting a studio interview of each guest with the

reenactment of their story. The encounters range from congenial spirits (such as deceased family members or friends) to evil entities. Each person reveals how the paranormal activity began, details about the activity, and whether any steps taken to end it were successful.

Celebrity Ghost Stories is similar to *Ghostly Encounters* with one exception: the individuals telling their stories are well-known actors, comedians, singers, or musicians. For example, when comedian Joan Rivers bought a New York apartment, her renovation of it stirred up the ghost of a former owner. When a friend died in *Star Wars* actress Carrie Fisher's home, paranormal activity began. Other celebrities telling their own ghost stories include Van Halen singer Sammy Hagar, The Go-Go's singer Belinda Carlisle, Twisted Sister singer Dee Snider, *Law & Order* actress Elisabeth Röhm, *Heroes* actor James Kyson Lee, comedian and actor Tom Arnold, and one of the original Ghost Busters, actor Ernie Hudson.

Haunted History focuses more on location and history than on individual people. Episodes can be themed, such as a "ghost ships" episode that examines the history of various vessels people claim to have seen after the ships sank.

Airing on the Discovery Channel and the Investigation Discovery Channel, *A Haunting* is the telling and reenactment of real-life haunted house stories told by the homeowners. Each case describes how the owners decided to buy the house, what they experienced, and the outcome,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which often results in moving to a new home.

In addition to the *Ghost Hunters* family of series, several other similar shows crop up on a surprising array of networks. The Arts and Entertainment (A&E) Channel's *Paranormal State* follows the investigations of college students who are members of the Penn State University Paranormal Research Society. Founder Ryan Buell encountered the paranormal in childhood, discovered like-minded peers at Penn State, and leads them on investigative missions, often calling in additional support from established psychics and mediums like *Psychic Kids'* Chip Coffey. While *Ghost Hunters* often debunks reported hauntings, *Paranormal State* seems to always find what they're looking for.

On the Travel Channel, thirty-something Zak Bagans takes a more in-your-face approach on *Ghost Adventures*, which is reminiscent of a haunted house movie. Zak and friends Nick Groff and Aaron Goodwin tour a property, set up their ghost-hunting equipment, and then they're locked inside to spend the night.

In other words, once they're locked inside there's no escape until morning… although in at least one episode the team was so shaken that they found a way to get out, despite the locks. These ghost hunters come across as a bunch of frat boys so intent on proving ghosts exist that they'll do whatever it takes.

Also on the Travel Channel. *Most Haunted* is an English series hosted by Yvette Fielding, who leads a team of ghost hunters to haunted sites in the United Kingdom, although more recent episodes have included sites in the United States, such as Gettysburg and the *Queen Mary*. Fielding is highly entertaining and probably the most compassionate of all ghost hunters. Once an investigation begins, she never hesitates to confront the suspected presence of a spirit and demand proof of its existence. But if her demands are met, Fielding often becomes frightened to the point of wanting to leave. At the same time, when séances reveal messages from people who don't know they're dead, Fielding's heart melts, and she's the first to offer help.

On the Fine Living Channel, *Haunted Homes* teams psychics with homeowners who believe their current abode is spooked. Again, following what has become the standard model of using technology to record evidence at night, the homeowners and psychics keep vigil and hope for paranormal activity.

On the Discovery Channel, *Ghost Lab* follows the investigations of Everyday Paranormal, a ghost-hunting group led by brothers Brad and Barry Klinge. Their goal is to use science to prove the existence of ghosts, and they visit the most haunted places in the United States to test their theories.

With so many people committed to debunking and/or proving the paranormal, one wonders if evidence that the most hardened scientist can accept will someday confirm the existence of ghosts.

In the meantime, it might not be a bad idea to learn from Micah Sloat's fate in *Paranormal Activity* and stay away from Ouija boards. ☙

Resa Nelson has been the TV/Movie columnist for *Realms of Fantasy* magazine since 1999. She is a SFWA member and a Clarion graduate. Her first novel, *The Dragonslayer's Sword* (published by Mundania Press), was a Finalist for the 2009 EPPIE Award for Best Fantasy Novel and is the first novel in her Dragonslayer series. Her next novel is a standalone novel: *Our Lady of the Absolute* is scheduled for publication in mid-2010. Nelson's short fiction has been published in *Science Fiction Age*, *Fantasy*, *MZB's Sword and Sorceress XXIII*, and other magazines and anthologies. Visit her website and blog at **www.resanelson.com**.

by Maggie Secara

Of Rings and the Circles of the World

Like any unbroken circle, a ring is a symbol of wholeness and continuity, a perimeter that marks the boundaries of what is within and what is without; what is included and what is left behind. The magical world is full of rings: A sorcerer draws a circle to contain his magic and constrain spirits. A circle of gold crowns the brow of the monarch anointed or approved by divine power. A round table seats the perfect knights, a fairy ring ensnares the unwary, and a ring of standing stones focuses the power of the dead among the living. The coronation ring upon the finger supports a stone of power.

The first finger rings, we are told, were a personal form of the carved signature cylinders used by Sumerian merchants to seal their goods and sign contracts. Curiously, having been pressed into service from pure commerce, finger rings seem the least mystical in origin of all the circular forms that dress our traditions. But are they? A signature is the written form of a name, and every name contains an element of power. When a name is written in a ring, an unbroken circle, it repeats itself as it turns. Later, signet rings, with an initial or sigil carved into the metal or on a set jewel, would serve the same purpose: to claim the owner's space in the world and impose order on it.

In the ancient world, the Greeks and Romans marked social status by the use of rings. The most simply dressed of Roman patricians or knights (*equites*) could still be identified by his gold ring, since such rings were reserved to the upper classes, while plebeians had to content themselves with iron. Roman women of any class could adorn themselves with whatever they could afford, although a virtuous matron was presumed to want no more than two rings. Roman couples sealed their pledge of lifelong fidelity at marriage with a ring. Then, as now, it was worn on the fourth finger of the left hand.

Among the gods of Babylon, the mother goddess Ishtar was depicted with a ring in her left hand for the continuity of life; and in Greek myth the Titan, Prometheus, when freed by Zeus, was made to wear as a ring the last link of the chain that had bound him, set with a sliver of the rock itself, as a reminder of his punishment. Ancient Egyptians, who lived by the power of amulets and talismans, held red stones to be proof against wounds and bleeding; in some tombs archaeologists have found rings set with jasper, red glass, or faience, apparently as protection against bleeding: for soldiers wounded in battle and for women menstruating or giving birth.

Among the Greeks and Romans, rings seem not to have been worn on the middle finger of either hand, and this habit persisted to at least the sixteenth century. This

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may have had something to do with an idea that the middle finger was for fools, or perhaps with an Eastern notion that those who did so were likely to be bitten by a scorpion. We'll never know. What we do know is that when looking at paintings and woodcuts of all classes of people all over Europe, even while Puritan preachers railed against the wearing of rings on every finger, we find the middle finger is consistently bare. Having explored the details of a lot of portraits over the years, I've found less than a handful showing a ring on that finger, although one was Mary Queen of Scots.

Renowned Medieval Rings

By the Middle Ages in Europe, rings were well established as ceremonial objects as well as simple adornment. The most glamorous medieval rings are those in the legends which continue to be retold and recast. Odin, they say, had a dwarf-made gold ring—perhaps an arm-ring such as were commonly worn in those days—called Draupnir, which had this virtue: that eight new golden rings fell from it every nine nights. According to a tenth-century Icelandic tale called *The Tricking of Gylfi* (*Gylfaginning*, part of Snorri Sturluson's *Elder Edda*), this provided Odin with treasure enough to continually bestow wealth on his followers, as a good lord must, till the end of time. And so he would have done, had it not been for the death of his beloved son, Baldur. The death of Baldur is another tale, but in the end, Odin placed his ring on the funeral pyre. Afterward, Baldur sent the ring back to Odin from Hel's realm as a remembrance. When it reappears in the story, Freyr's servant is offering it to Gerðr the giant's daughter to woo her for his master.

Around the turn of the first millennium, a traveler returning from Jerusalem brought a ring to the saintly king of the English, Edward the Confessor. This pilgrim told a tale of adventures, trials, loss, and comfort, concluding that the man who had sheltered him in the Holy Land had identified himself as John the Evangelist, and given him a ring to take home to his king. This ring, he said, not only had a healing power but it could also consecrate that power to other precious rings. Although Odin never enters into this story, there is an unmistakable resonance between the dwarf-wrought Draupnir and the holy ring from Jerusalem.

What became of King Edward's ring is not entirely certain. Some say it was buried with him, but was missing when the coffin was opened in 1163, a few years after his canonization. The corpse was found to be fresh, rosy-cheeked, and supple of limb, as expected of a saint, but the ring was gone. It is also supposed to have passed into the keeping of the Abbott of Westminster, but perhaps that was only one of the "daughter" rings of the original. In any case, on every Good Friday up until Queen Mary Tudor's death, it was used (along with the monarch's own consecrated powers of healing) to bless batches of gold and silver rings bathed in holy water, which were

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Arcane Whispers
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then distributed to the populace as wards against cramp and the falling sickness.

This and many other traditions were banned with the Reformation, but people's need for blessing isn't so easily crushed. Customs grew up wherein, for example, a person would beg a silver penny from each of twelve people, and trade them to the parish priest for a silver shilling from the Sunday offering plate. This "sacrament silver" would be made into a ring, whose healing powers derived from its having been in contact with other holy things. The *Oxford Dictionary of English Folklore* reports several other ways the metals for such rings might be gathered, even as late as the 1800s. In Devon, for instance, three nails from three coffins in three separate churchyards were required. Not a task for the faint of heart!

You might expect another sort of sacramental ring to have been part of the Reformation, too—something that recusant Roman Catholics might use to practice their faith clandestinely. But rosary rings (sometimes called a finger rosary) can be traced as far back as Chaucer's time, the late 1300s, and continue in use today. This ring was a simple band with a raised cross and ten bumps or knobs set round the circle, to allow the devout to count ten Ave Marias and a Pater Noster, without the fuss of a fully beaded rosary.

Medieval Melodrama

While Odin's ring found a literary home in Iceland, somewhere on the Danube rose the Burgundian story of Sigurd and Brynhildr, Gunnar and Gudrun, the dragon, and the ring of the Nibelungen, and the hopeless mess it made of that family. Magic rings, especially those stolen from dragons, really ought not to be allowed in the bedroom, especially a ring that curses the owner but has no other properties. Although, like Tolkien's familiar One Ring, it causes strife and creates irrational jealousies, it principally serves to fuel the soap opera of the Burgundian homeland with rape, deceit, and revenge.

Most romantic of the legendary rings is surely the one that Morgan le Fay gave to the ambitious sorceress Vivien. In Howard Pyle's version (1915), she takes the ring to King Arthur's Pentecost court (where wonders always occur) and says, "Here is a ring of such a sort that only he who is the most wise and the most worthy of all men here present may wear it." None at Arthur's court were worthy of the ring, except for Merlin, who first looked at Vivien sourly.

> Then Merlin smiled, and took the ring and placed it upon his finger, and, lo! it fitted the finger exactly. Thereupon Vivien cried out, "See! the ring hath fitted his finger and he is the most wise and the most worthy." And Merlin was greatly pleased that the ring which the beautiful damsel had given him had fitted his finger in that way.
>
> Then, after a while, he would have withdrawn the ring again but, behold! he could not, for the ring had grown to his finger as though it were a part of the flesh and the bone thereof. At this Merlin became much troubled in spirit and very anxious, for he did not understand what might be meant by the magic of the ring. So he said, "Lady, whence came this ring?" And Vivien said, "Sir, thou knowest all things; dost thou then not know that this ring was sent hitherward from Morgana le Fay?" Then again Merlin was greatly a-doubt, and he said, "I hope there may be no evil in this ring." And Vivien smiled upon him and said, "What evil could there be in it?"
>
> Now by this time the great magic that was in the ring began to work upon Merlin's spirit, wherefore he regarded Vivien very steadily, and suddenly he took great pleasure in her beauty. Then the magic of the ring gat entire hold upon him and, lo! a wonderful passion immediately seized upon his heart and wrung it so that it was pierced as with a violent agony.
>
> And Vivien beheld what passed in Merlin's mind, and she laughed and turned away. And several others who

were there also observed the very strange manner in which Merlin regarded her, wherefore they said among themselves, "Of a surety Merlin is bewitched by the beauty of that young damoiselle."

So, after that time the enchantment of the ring of Morgana le Fay so wrought upon Merlin's spirit that he could in no wise disentangle himself from Vivien's witchery.

Loyalty, Constancy, Trust

The continuous circle of a wedding ring signifies constancy, and it is often made

of gold because its incorruptible nature is seen as emblematic of a good marriage. Gold coins, after all, may lie in a treasure trove lost at the bottom of the sea and come to the surface hundreds of years later still perfectly bright and shining. And so, it says here, does the love of those who bind themselves with it.

Although there are no wedding or betrothal rings mentioned in the Bible, in Christian Europe for centuries the only thing necessary to make a marriage legal was the agreement of the two parties involved and the exchange of a token, generally a ring. It took a long time, and a reformation of religion, to firmly get every couple into the church and invite the priest and the neighbors.

In many places and times only the woman wore a ring, sometimes placed on the right hand at betrothal and moved to the left at the wedding; sometimes after counting off the thumb, fore and middle fingers in the name of the Father, Son, and Holy Ghost, and with the "Amen," the priest slipped the ring onto the customary finger. The choice of finger came from an ancient notion that a *vena amoris*, or "vein of love," ran from that finger directly to the heart. Although there was a fashion in the seventeenth century for wearing the ring on the thumb, this fancy eventually succumbed to mere practicality.

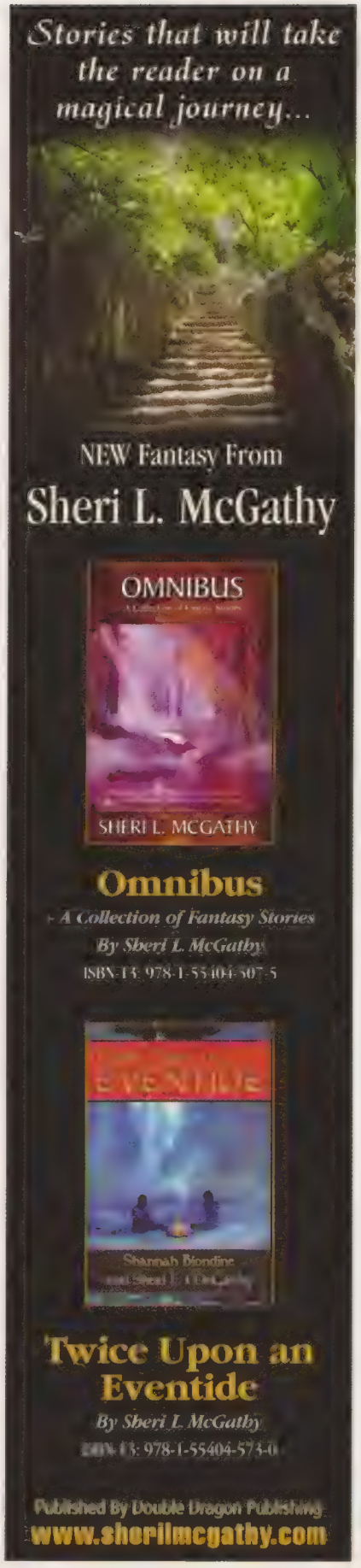
On occasion a ring might be plaited of grass or rushes, cut from the finger of a leather glove, or shaped from the stem of a spoon. Such marriages frequently lasted only as long as the rings, which were sometimes used to trick a modest girl into giving herself to a rogue. However, the bishop of Salisbury put a stop to that in 1217 by declaring such marriages to be just as legal as those made with a golden ring. And in fact, over the centuries many peasant wives had to make do with such temporary tokens, remaking them as they fell apart, until the Reformation offered a solution.

By the latter part of the sixteenth century, when the Reformation was well established in England, Calvinist reformers had become committed iconoclasts, inveighing at every opportunity against Roman superstition, which included most of the traditions of the Roman Catholic Church. Even wedding rings. At the gentlest, David Cressy tells us, they pronounced "the use of the ring in marriage is foolish" and "superfluous if not superstitious." At the other extreme, it was called "a profanation and a pollution!" One Puritan maiden, on coming to the altar and finding the ring set out on the prayer book, was so incensed that she snatched up the ring and flung it out of the window.

Mind you, the Puritans were not merely being difficult about the superstitious nature of wedding rings, and were not altogether wrong. The ring, having been blessed as part of the ritual, came to be thought of as invested with sacred power of its own. As such, folk wisdom believed, it was a charm against sickness and even against the influence of the Devil. Even the Reformation didn't stop people from treating the wedding ring as a holy object.

However, the ring was an official part of the Anglican wedding service, and most people never even thought of marrying without it. And so, as Cressy notes, the wedding ring continued in English tradition without further hindrance as "an especial pledge of faith and fidelity." The image of continuity represented by the marriage ring was so strong that when widowed, a woman took off her wedding ring because she was no longer married. Then as now there was "nothing more fit to serve as a token of our purposed endless continuance."

Many sixteenth-century marriage rings



had mottoes inscribed on the inside or outside of the band, describing how the marriage should prosper:

Love True
Forever
With everlasting Love
I am yours, love me truly.
After consent, ever content.

Maneat inviolata fides (Let your faith be inviolate)

Conjugii firmi et casti sum pignus amoris (I am the pledge of loyal marriage and chaste love)

The longer sentiments were often engraved on the multiple interlocking bands of a *gemmal* ring. This ring consisted of from two (the *gemini* that gave the ring its name) to as many as eight interlocking bands. Some opened on a hinge to reveal a heart or a gem. Others contained lines which when read together created a poem or *poesy* like this one:

Love is fix'd, I will not range
I like my choice, I will not change
Wit, health, and beauty all do dwell
But constant Love doth far excel

Completing the circle of life, so to speak, rings were also commonly part of the regalia in an Elizabethan funeral. A man's will often budgeted money to be used for mourning rings for especially close friends or relations; a nobleman might specify his closest associates, and even the Queen. Such rings tended to be made up as *memento mori*, reminders of mortality, displaying skulls, coffins, and skeletons. They might also be made up cheaply in copper or tin, and purchased in large lots to be distributed to all the mourners in a funeral procession.

Rings of Power

Investing magic in domestic jewelry was as common and instinctive as tucking a page ripped from a Bible into the baby's cradle to protect it against sickness and accident. Among the more learned, however, certain rings could be perceived to hold real power. Dr John Dee's diary tells us that while taking angelic dictation (by way of Edward Kelly), he received instructions for making a ring of power from the Archangel Michael. Unfortunately, he seems to have made no further notations about this ring or what power it was supposed to hold, or whether he actually created it. Since the directions specified it should be marked with a seal of Solomon, we can guess at its powers: King Solomon was known to have bound the djinn, afrits, and other demons of the ancient world, so mastery over such spirits—to safely summon, control, and dismiss them—as well as all the other miracles, divine works, and wonders that were wrought by Solomon.

From ancient times, rings appeared as talismans and amulets, some for prosperity, some for protection. The pedigree of such rings is too long and richly detailed to recount more than a few examples. One formula appears for a sun-ring to obtain favor and success; it made the wearer glorious, great, admirable, and rich, and guaranteed love. All wishes would be fulfilled. And so on. It was even good for driving demons

out of one possessed. If the ring itself was in the form of a serpent swallowing its tail, set with a heliotrope (green jasper), and engraved with, among many other things, the owner's name, all things were possible.

A medieval Arabian story tells of a ring used to frighten away ghosts. And the fifteenth-century fabliaux of Reynard the Fox describes a ring of fine gold, and within the ring were written letters enameled with sable and azure, and three Hebrew names. The story reports that this ring was Adam's, brought out of Paradise by his son Seth, and conferred protection against thunder, lightning, and witchcraft. Moreover, the wearer would never be harmed by cold weather, even though he lay down and slept in the snow.

The continuity of ring magic is not limited to shape. Nineteenth- and twentieth-century storytellers made as much use of the ring as in ages past. Although the stories are much older, Sir Richard Burton translated and circulated old Chinese and Arabian stories in *The Thousand Nights and One Night* (1850), including Aladdin and the genie of the ring. C. S. Lewis used green and yellow rings in *The Magician's Nephew* (1955) to travel between his own grimy industrial world and the worlds of sorcery-haunted Charn and vital, magical Narnia. In *The Lord of the Rings* (1954), J. R. R. Tolkien, drawing on the enchantments of Anglo-Saxon lore, used an apparently plain gold ring to illustrate the perils of power unchecked.

Rings of power in the modern era are wielded by the current version of the magical warrior, the comic book superhero. The Phantom wears two rings—one "Good Mark" and one "Evil Mark"—that both identify him and leave an imprint on his friends and foes. Wonder Woman wears rings of a sort: a pair of golden cuffs that are the source of her power. The Green Lantern and the intergalactic Green Lantern Corps each use a ring as the source of their power.

There have been several generations of the Green Lantern, and several variations on his ring. The original power ring was a magical one that had to be recharged every twenty-four hours and was useless on wooden objects. In later years, the ring became a technological marvel instead, conferring on the champion the ability to fly, generate a force field, fling plasma bolts, and numerous other powers that Solomon would never have imagined. And as with other rings of power, whether magic or machine, the effectiveness of the ring depends upon the strength of the hero's will.

A ring also lies at the heart of the power of Harry Potter's nemesis, Lord Voldemort, who created the first horcrux when he killed his own father to obtain a ring set with the Resurrection Stone—the object that lets Harry finally speak with his dead parents at the climax of the last novel. The fantasy saga's author, J. K. Rowling, has drawn from a rich trove of Anglo-European lore in creating her universe, so it seems somehow symmetrical that the most powerful of the three Deathly Hallows, stolen by a son from his father, completes a circle that contains the ring that Odin's dead son returned to him.

The magic, it seems, never ends.

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AfterImage

by Jaye Roycraft

Book Two in Jaye Roycraft's acclaimed Image series: Drago returns! Nothing is going well for Alek Dragovich, enforcer for the Undead. His position in the Directorate is in jeopardy, but he has little interest in the Directorate's schemes until someone tries to kill him. Dhampir Marya Jaks, the offspring of a vampire and his mortal wife, can detect vampires, thereby making her a perfect vampire killer.

When Marya learns that Drago has deemed her a threat to the vampire community and has ordered her termination, she strikes back. Drago, the hunter, has become the hunted, but is it Marya who wants him dead or a mysterious power-hungry vampire?

Touch Of Night

by Carin Rafferty

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Blackmore's Night

by Warren Lapine

To many in the fantasy world, Blackmore's Night needs no introduction. Blackmore's Night weaves a magical blend of renaissance folk music and classical music with the unmistakable sounds of Ritchie Blackmore's guitar virtuosity. In addition to their seven studio albums, two compilations, and two live albums, Blackmore's Night has also performed the music for MagiQuest, the magical live action game.

Warren Lapine: We really enjoyed your show in Charlotte. How did the rest of your recent US tour go?

Candice Night: It was really great. After spending so much time overseas playing in castles it is always a treat to be able to play some tour dates at home. It's rare that we play the USA, so it's always a special occasion for us when we do. It's a difficult market. But the fans in America have the best imaginations, so they really get the fantasy escape of the music, or the dressing up in costume and the different aspects of our show. And our fans are amazing and really appreciative when we come to town so it really becomes quite an event.

WL: I understand you have a new CD coming out soon. What can you tell us about it?

CN: We have five songs already recorded for it. We like to pick up inspiration as we travel around the world. There is such a wealth of faerie tales and myths and legends or local folklore that we learn about as we play different countries and regions. We pick up on not only the different visuals and customs but the local music as well so we are able to infuse all these different inspirations into our music. We found the best way to approach recording is to do some songs, then go on tour and step away from those songs so that we can revisit them and hear them with fresh ears when we go back into the studio to record the next batch. Although we have the basic ideas, arrangements, and lyrical content down, we never really know what direction the CD is going to take us in until we reflect on it after we create it. We just let the music lead us where it wants us to go. We just try to channel it.

WL: My five-year-old daughter wanted me to tell you that her favorite song is "Fires at Midnight," and she wants to know which of your CDs and songs are your favorites, and why?

Ritchie Blackmore: I have different ones at different times. I'm really pleased with how *Winter Carols* came out. I find I can listen to that year round.

CN: It is hard to choose a favorite because each one is like looking at a scrapbook of your life and photos of where you were at that moment. They are all strong songs and CDs in their own right. And my favorite changes daily. My favorite ones to do in concert are the more dramatic songs like "Fires at Midnight," "Ghost of a Rose," "Village Lanterne," and "The Circle." But in more reflective moments I'll go to "Hanging Tree," "Empty Words," or "Windmills." But I guess it's like choosing a favorite child. I really love them all equally.

WL: Ritchie, do you approach writing songs any differently for Blackmore's Night than you did for Rainbow or Deep Purple?

RB: Yes. With Purple, I would come up with a riff and a chord progression and Ian would come up with the top line. Sometimes I would have no idea what that top line would be. With Rainbow, I would have a riff and some heavy chords and a vague idea of what the melody would be. With this project, I come up with a chord progression and a melody, and get Candice to sing it to see if there is potential. Then she'll put the lyrics to it and then I might add a riff at the tail end of the whole thing integrated into the chord structure. Sometimes Candice will tell me I have played a riff or melody before, somewhere else. I sometimes repeat myself. I tend also to borrow heavily from medieval renaissance melodies.

WL: Candice, before meeting Ritchie and before the two of you formed Blackmore's Night, did you have musical aspirations?

CN: Music was always my great escape. I felt like people who wrote those songs that I connected with on a deep emotional level understood me, even though they were strangers, more than people who were close to me. But I thought that I would work at a radio station or a record company—just to be able to be around music. I was at a radio station for one and a half years when I met Ritchie and he swept me away from that path. I didn't think I'd be the one writing or performing the songs. Now I can't imagine not doing it.

WL: Candice, tell us about your role as Amora in MagiQuest. How did it come about, and was it fun?

CN: Actually, I began as Princess Candice, and that started when the creators of MagicQuest came to see our show in Las Vegas and loved the interaction between Ritchie and myself. They saw him as a "shadow figure" and me as a "princess of light." They had an idea in mind to utilize cutting edge technology with fantasy. So essentially, they took computer technology, embedded it in magic wands, and created a theme park complete with wizards, dragons, faeries, unicorns, and goblins. Stonehenge is in the center of the park and holds the key to your next levels of adventure. There are multiple layers of quests you can go on. In my quest, the goblins have stolen my jewels and you need to obtain the healing runes of Andover and return them to me so that my healing singing voice can be returned and I can heal the forest animals. It is really an amazing concept. The wand will remember you and what level you are at no matter how much time lapses. You can fight a dragon and the floor moves beneath you as heat blows at you from the walls when he breathes fire. It's for all ages because the little children believe in magic and believe that when they wave their wand and the doors open or crystals sing to them, it is true magic. But the teens and adults understand the concept of the game. Princess Amora—my alter ego!—is a part I play at the MagiQuests at Great Wolf Lodge. She is a forest warrior and has the celestial bear constellation as her spirit guide. The wolves are her friends.

WL: Ritchie, I'm amazed at how well your guitar riffs go with some of the exotic instruments that Blackmore's Night uses. Do you have to approach playing with something like a hurdy-gurdy any differently than if you were just playing a more straight-up rock song?

RB: Yes, I have written many ideas for melodies using the hurdy-gurdy and the nickel harp. As I am not very musically adept at those instruments, I come up with different angles on certain melodies compared to how I would've played them on the guitar. It encourages me to go into different areas that I wouldn't explore with the guitar.

WL: I understand that the two of you hunt for ghosts. What does that entail?

RB: It's more likely they hunt for us. It is just a hobby we both have. Paranormal.

CN: We have done that for many years. It would be foolish to believe that there is just this one dimension or just us existing and nothing else. So we communicate with the otherworlds when we feel there is something present.

WL: Is there any question that you've always wished someone would ask you in an interview, but no one ever has? If so, what would be the question and answer?

RB: Why do I not have a lower back tattoo? The answer is that it is called a tramp stamp, not that I have anything against tramps. We are all tramps at heart.

WL: Is there anything you'd like to say to your fans?

RB: Thanks for having an interest in our music. We know that we are not the trend-of-the-day type of band and it takes a bit of courage to like our music.

CN: And always to believe in magic….

WL: Thank you both for the interview.

Just Another Word

by Carrie Vaughn
Illustration by Peter Ferguson

Where do you go when you've got nothing left to lose?

Had to be a better world than this.

Bigger colors, brighter skies. Something. Saw it in her mind sometimes when she sang, like fireworks deep in the hindbrain. But the song always stopped. Had to have an end, that's what made it a song. Otherwise, singing all the time, music all the time—it would just be air.

A person could get into a lot of trouble, following those colors. Finding brighter ones, bigger shades. Looking for something sharper in the music. For something sharper *than* the music. It had almost killed her once, the singing and getting strung out, looking for brighter lights. Never again. She'd keep clean this time. She'd even tried to stop singing. But she couldn't go that far, not in the end.

Sometimes, she felt like what she sought was nothing more than a pinprick of light at the end of a dark, dark tunnel. Past that light had to be a better world, if she could just get to it. But the tunnel kept going on forever.

And that was how a white girl from south Texas ended up sitting on a bare stage in the back of a bar, strumming guitar and singing a throaty kind of blues.

Maybe she could stay here, singing, forever. Maybe she would never need any more than this.

Then one night, singing, the light got big, brighter than a sun for a moment, a flashbulb of clarity. Did that sometimes, when

she hit the right note. But her voice stumbled, and the light stayed. Nothing else changed. Nothing much. She kept on singing, but opened her eyes to look.

Been drinking too much. That's all she thought it was, when she saw the woman sitting in the back of the bar. No woman like that was ever in Texas, not even in Houston. The way her nails were painted, how her hair was pinned up like some Hollywood starlet, the single diamond hanging around her neck. The way she glowed. Plenty of oilmen's wives tried to look like that, spent the money and wore the diamonds. But they always came off as hens dressed up in peacock feathers. This woman, she had a space to herself. No one sat near her. No one even seemed to see her, which was strange, and another reason Janis thought it was just the booze making her see things. Just going crazy.

Then Janis found herself singing just to her.

And the woman smiled, and Janis thought, there goes my heart. Just like in the songs.

Janis packed up slow and stumbled out, hoping to catch the last bus, or maybe hitch it home. Some nights she had friends waiting for her. Tonight she didn't, at least she thought she didn't, until she saw the white Caddy in the parking lot and the tall, pale woman standing next to the open back door. There was a driver and everything, a shadow behind the tinted windows.

"Let me give you a ride," she said, her voice like a bell pealing through an autumn sky.

Guitar case dangling in her hand, Janis obeyed, mutely.

Driving on empty roads, inside the car, Janis couldn't hear anything outside it. Plush seats felt like velvet. Tiny lights above the door cast just enough to see by—enough to make weird shadows. The driver still didn't seem much more than shadow, hat low over his head, gloved hands loose on the wheel, like he barely had to steer.

The woman smelled faintly of apples.

She wore a gray fur coat, even though it wasn't all that cold. A white hat topped her pale hair, with a bit of netting draped over her brow. White silk gloves covered her hands, which rested starkly over the coat, on her lap.

Janis wondered if she should say something. Thank you, maybe. But she could say that at the end of the ride. Anything else she might have been thinking, like who the hell are you and what are you doing here, didn't seem right. Didn't seem right saying anything at all when she came down to it. All she wanted to do was stare: perfect fingers, slim neck rising above the coat, to a perfect, noble face. Eyes hard like diamonds.

Janis wondered if she should say something. Thank you, maybe. But she could say that at the end of the ride. Anything else she might have been thinking, like who the hell are you and what are you doing here, didn't seem right.

"You have a beautiful voice," the woman said after a few miles of driving.

Janis blinked, startled—and realized neither of them, the lady or her driver, asked where she needed to go. They were just driving.

Some kind of spell broke and she could think again. Then, she bit her lip to hide her smile. "You'll find better in a church choir." Her country girl voice sounded like sandpaper compared to this woman's.

"There are different kinds of beauty," the woman said.

Janis frowned and tried to look out the window, but between the tinting and the light, she only saw herself, round rough face and stringy brown hair tied up tight. Oversized shirt and sweater. Proper skirt. Trying to go straight and be respectable. Trying so damn hard. There was nothing glamorous and beautiful about her. Nothing about her to love. And yet, wasn't that the point, be yourself, your own person, don't follow the crowd, don't try to be some painted smiling cheerleader type when what you really wanted was to be free. And yet. If she could just be *normal*.

A different kind of beauty. The woman was like carved glass. Cut your heart if you let it. Suspicion dawned on Janis: What would a woman like that want with a homely thing like her? Woman like that could have anything, probably did have everything. Wandered about, plucking what she wanted clean off the street.

To a girl like Janis she was the light at the end of a tunnel. But it was dangerous, running toward something like that. Too perfect. She wanted it too much. And she'd end up strung out and done for, like she had before.

Because of all these thoughts, of expectations she didn't know she had, because it wasn't the better world she wanted, Janis wasn't surprised when the woman said:

"Will you come with me? Sing for me and just for me?"

Paid gig, Janis thought first off, and there was something to be said for that. But then she wanted to know, "Why?"

The woman flinched back a fraction, as if she'd made this offer to a hundred other singers and not one had ever asked that before.

"Come with me," she said, a hungry turn to her mouth. "And I will honor you. My court will honor you. I will shower accolades and riches upon you. This is a rare chance. You understand, don't you?"

Ah, that dream of fame. That dream of being loved. It hadn't gone away, had it? Is that the light she was after?

The woman would take care of her, look after her, adore her. Janis could see, just by sitting close to her in the back of her car, how very bright her world was. She would be loved—

The woman hadn't smiled, not once.

Long as they'd been driving, they ought to be out in the middle of nowhere by now.

"You only get this one chance," the woman said. "Hesitate, and you'll never see me again."

Janis shuddered at the tragedy of it. Gut impulse said, *Yes, keep going, take me away, love me.*

What was the trick, the catch? Maybe it was a joke. But then, she might never have another chance.

She could argue herself out of anything. Talk herself in circles. Kept trying to get out of her own head, and ended up staring at her hands, thinking too much, too hard. She longed to throw herself at this woman. Such a clear path. Easy.

Except she didn't believe this woman really wanted *her*.

And that was what made her hesitate. Being with her, even with all she promised, would be another kind of trap, sure as being strung out and stinking drunk. This woman's scent was making her high, and it frightened her.

"What happens if I say no?" Janis said.

"Despair," the woman said, without hesitation, without emotion, skin like ice, eyes like frost. "You'll seek to find me again. You'll never succeed. You might win the adulation of millions, but all your life you'll seek for more, as every taste of joy turns to dust in your mouth. The world will pale, dim to almost nothing, after I leave you. If you refuse me."

The picture she drew for Janis was so very clear. And yet.

Janis stared a moment, fearful. Then she laughed. Because she'd been to that dark place already. "That supposed to scare me? Whatever you're selling, lady, can't be that good. Figure life after you can't be too much darker than life before."

"Then…your answer?"

Janis turned away. She could talk herself into or out of just about anything. It all came down to what scared her more. She took a breath. "Maybe you ought to just let me out here."

"Stop the car," the woman said, and the car stopped, instantly.

They'd been driving for an hour, should have been in the middle of nowhere or nearly there. But they were on the corner, right outside the bar, a few steps from where they'd picked her up in the first place. Janis didn't remember turning any corners.

The door opened on its own. The woman didn't move. Looked Janis up and down with heavy-lidded eyes and said, "Pity."

Janis didn't need to be told to get out. Suddenly, she wanted to flee. She slammed the door behind her, flush with rage, angry that she'd even gotten into the car with that woman in the first place. Who does she think she is? What kind of woman picks up musicians in bars? There was nothing good in any of it.

The Caddy pulled away, humming quietly, not even kicking up the gravel of the parking lot. Left in darkness, Janis watched the car disappear into the night, and wondered. ☙

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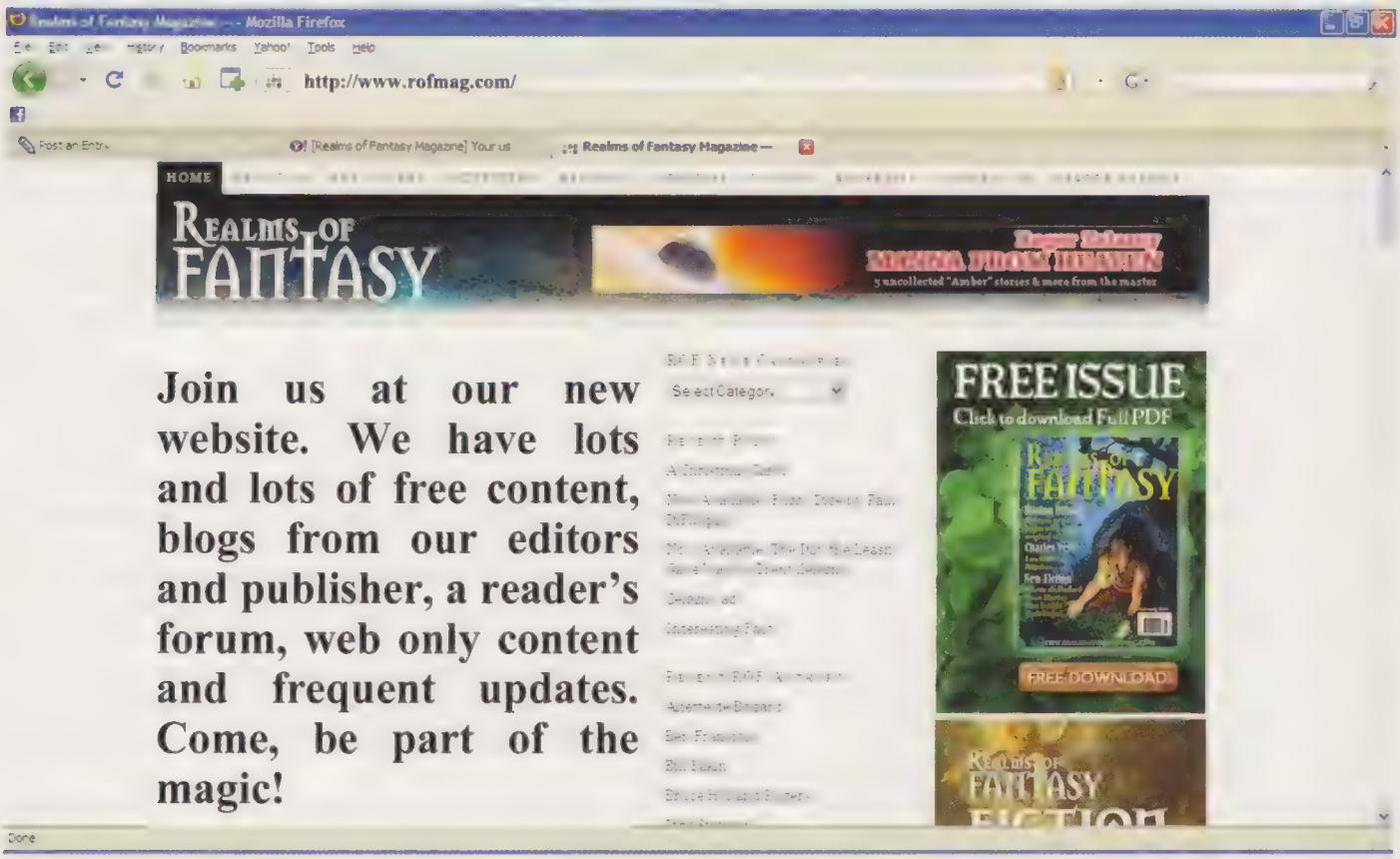
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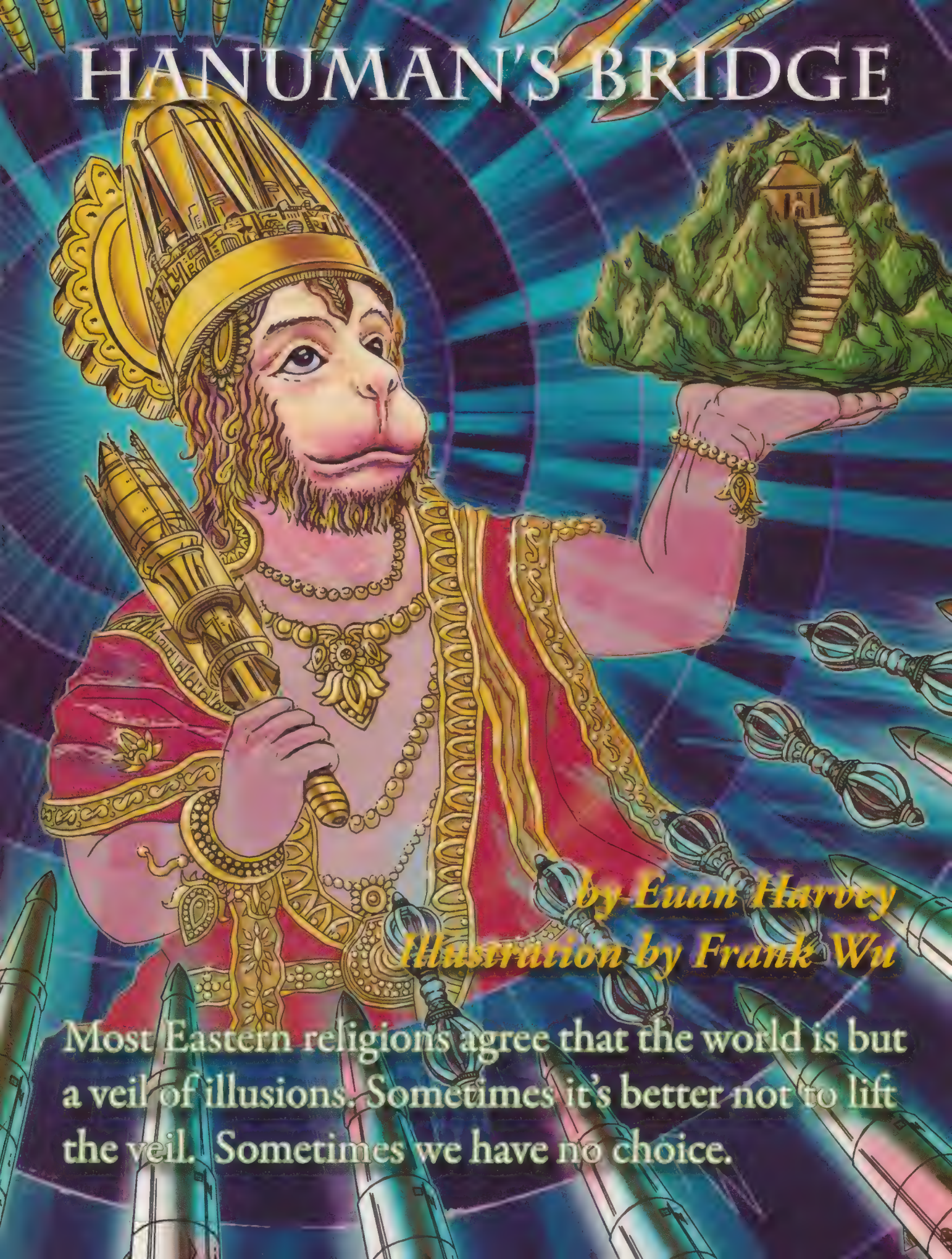
HANUMAN'S BRIDGE



by Euan Harvey

Illustration by Frank Wu

Most Eastern religions agree that the world is but a veil of illusions. Sometimes it's better not to lift the veil. Sometimes we have no choice.

The bridge screamed. Even from where he stood on the headland, Davis could hear it—a wailing screech like fingernails on slate.

Visually, the bridge was stunning, with the breathtaking beauty that only manifests at the intersection of bold design and brilliant engineering. Gleaming like brushed steel, the bridge seemed to gather itself below Davis, muscles bunching under sleek metal before launching itself over the white-flecked jade of the Indian Ocean.

But a freak resonance in the miles of cables and struts meant that when the wind blew from the east, from what last year was Sri Lanka and now was the Indian states of Tamil Eelam and Sinhala, then the bridge screamed, a wordless howl that grated on the nerves until sometimes Davis felt like screaming along with it.

Below the headland, a procession wound its way toward the bridge. A mile long, the line of worshippers snaked back along the coast road. A statue of Hanuman bobbed at the front of the procession, orange and yellow streamers flapping from it. At the foot of the bridge, officials waited by the ribbon. When it was cut, the bridge would be officially open, and Sri Lanka joined to the mainland.

"Superstitious nonsense, isn't it?" a cultured voice asked from beside Davis. The speaker had the sleekly groomed look that all the high-ranking Indian government officials had: tailored charcoal-gray suit, Windsor-knotted tie, a gleaming and perfectly trimmed mustache.

Davis groped for an appropriate reply. "I…ah… Religion is not my thing."

"Come, Mr. Davis," the man said. "We are both educated. Superstitious nonsense—is that not what you mean?" He smiled again, showing his very white teeth. "But of course you cannot say. You are hoping for another commission from the government. And why would you not? Your bridge is a marvel."

Davis was flustered. "I—"

The man laughed and held out his hand. "I am Raban. Mr. Dasharnukha Raban. Of the War Office."

Davis shook Raban's hand. It was hot but very dry. The wind picked up a notch, and the bridge's shriek rose an octave.

"But you are with a friend here, Mr. Davis. I assure you." Raban nodded. "I am in your debt. Your design, the construction of your bridge, is what has enabled me to finally escape from Lanka."

"Escape?" Davis asked, confused.

"Politics, Mr. Davis." Raban leaned closer. "An enemy here, an enemy there, and one finds oneself exiled to a wretched little island. Oh, that place, Mr. Davis! You have no idea. Quite, quite uncivilized. And the people…

Raban gave a theatrical shudder. "Violent, Mr. Davis. Positively thuggish. You saw for yourself how long the wretched little war between the Tamil Tigers and the Colombo government dragged on. Thank God that Singh had the courage to do what was so obviously necessary."

Davis doubted the Sri Lankans would agree, but when the world's biggest army decided it wanted to "resolve" problems in a neighboring state, the rest of the world might complain—but they wouldn't actually do a damn thing. Not when the Indian government now had more nukes than the U.S. Only the Pakistanis had really bristled, and so the nuclear-tipped standoff between India and Pakistan had ratcheted up another notch, moving the world to a peak of tension not seen since the Cuban missile crisis.

But on the other hand, Raban had a point about the war. The conflict between the Tigers and the Colombo government had smoldered unceasing for decades, getting steadily worse each year. Millions had died, the economy of Sri Lanka suffered total collapse, and the war progressed from bush fighting to conventional battles to camps and ethnic cleansing and mass graves in the jungle.

Three jets howled past overhead, white painted missiles like claws under their wings. The shriek of their engines was deafening, and Davis crouched in instinctive fear.

Raban didn't move. "You don't approve?" he said, nodding in the direction of the jets.

Davis picked his words with care. "It seems unnecessary to me. After all, it's not as if the planes will help if the Pakistanis decide to…" He left the rest unsaid.

"You believe what Bhutto says then?"

"He laid a pretty clear ultimatum," Davis said. "Whether he'll carry it through…" He shrugged. "I don't think he's that crazy, but there's a whole lot of missiles all pointed at each other, and accidents do happen. Yeah, I'm worried. Aren't you?"

"Why?" Raban asked. "The world has come through this before, has it not? Your Cold War? The missile crisis of Cuba? And yet here we are—you from America, and I from Sri Lanka."

Missile crisis? Davis blinked. It was as if Raban had read his mind—but given the situation, maybe it wasn't all that surprising. "The world came through it, sure," Davis said. "But only just. The missile crisis was a tipping point. You know, the fate of the world in balance. All it needed was a little push, and…" He shrugged.

Raban smiled again. "Still, we are safe enough here, are we not?" He gestured to a point behind Davis's back.

Davis knew what Raban was referring to: the squat mouth of the bunker—thick slabs of concrete lining a tunnel that wormed deep into the headland. Deep enough—so the bureaucrats claimed—to withstand even a bomb dropped on the bridge itself.

When Davis heard them say that, and he heard the self-satisfied smugness in their voices, he wanted to tell them about salted bombs, the cobalt-tipped missiles that Musharraf had built, his terminal answer to the heroin-funded insurgents in the border. Cobalt-60 had a half-life of 5.27 years. If the Pakistanis dropped one near the bridge, people were going to need a *lot* of food in that bunker, maybe fifteen to twenty years worth. Waziristan was still glowing—Davis had seen the eerie Cherenkov blue in the lakes and rivers from a night flight.

But Davis just nodded. "I guess so."

Raban's smile broadened, and Davis had a strange feeling that Raban knew exactly what Davis was thinking, and wasn't angered by it—more *amused*. Davis groped for a change of subject.

The head of the procession was only a hundred feet from the end of the bridge now. As Davis watched, a strong gust of wind slammed into the statue, and it toppled over to one side. The bearers scattered and the statue crashed onto the road, breaking off one arm. The procession halted for a moment, priests and officials arguing and waving their arms. Then the priests sprinkled Hanuman with water. The statue wobbled back into position—minus one arm—and the procession continued its slow advance on the bridge. The party of officials waited patiently by the ribbon and altar; yellow flags and bunting snapped and flapped in the wind.

"Hanuman," Raban said, and Davis heard the sneer in his voice.

Davis turned back. "Hanuman?"

Raban nodded at the statue. "The image, there. It is Hanuman. He is a monkey god. Imagine, Mr. Davis! My countrymen, they make a God from a monkey! In what other country would this happen? Do you know why he is at the front of the procession?"

Davis shrugged. He hadn't taken much interest in anything outside the design of the bridge.

"They think this is the Nala Sethu," Raban said. "Hanuman's bridge. Do you know the Ramayana, Mr. Davis?"

"Sorry. No."

"Why are you sorry, Mr. Davis? It is like all mythology: lies, written by the foolish to explain things they do not understand. I will not bore you with a tedious recitation of the entire poem; it is *very* long, Mr. Davis. In summary, the rakshasa Ravana, who dominates the universe through his great knowledge and power, steals Sita, the wife of Ram. Ram then attempts to recover Sita from Ravana. You see, Mr. Davis?" Raban's lip curled. "It parallels the Iliad. Eventually, Hanuman finds Sita in the city of Lanka, which is ruled by Ravana. However, the army of Ram cannot cross the straits to rescue Sita, as the water is too deep and the currents too strong. Hanuman then builds a bridge to Lanka by throwing rocks into the sea, each rock being marked by the name of Ram. He thus gains access to Lanka, besieges the city, and kills Ravana in a duel—even though at the beginning of this fanciful tale, we are told that Ravana cannot be killed."

"And they think this is the bridge that Hanuman built?" Davis asked, gesturing at the crowd. "Really?"

"It is not the same," Raban said. "But do you know the word *avatara?"*

"Avatar?"

"Yes." Raban smiled. "A physical incarnation of an ideal. That is what they believe this bridge to be. A manifestation of the original Nala Sethu. Peasants." He looked down at the procession as it crept toward the bridge. "They read a story, and they believe it to be true! The *literal* truth, Mr. Davis."

"They did find Troy, you know," Davis said, interested despite himself.

"Schliemann found a city, yes," Raban said. "Perhaps it was even a historical Troy. But finding an ancient city does not mean the Iliad is true. The historical events are like the root the story springs from. All such stories have roots."

"All of them?" Davis raised an eyebrow. "Even a bridge built by monkeys?"

"Yes, Mr. Davis," Raban said. "Even a bridge built by monkeys."

"You're kidding me," Davis said in disbelief. "What kind of historical event could underlie something like that?"

"A good question, Mr. Davis." Raban smiled again. "A *very* good question. We must assume some kind of war, must we not? As with the Iliad? So, we have a war between two ancient nations—forgotten now, I think. Perhaps there was a woman, perhaps not. Who can tell? All we know is that there was a war, a battle fought somewhere on Sri Lanka."

"Okay, I can buy that," Davis said. "But a bridge built by monkeys? What kind of evidence could there possibly be for that?"

The wind whooped around them. Below, the banners flapped, yellow and orange like flames, as if the statue of Hanuman burned as the procession slowly wormed toward the bridge.

Raban shook his head. "As I said, *all* of these stories have a root of truth somewhere. And we must search for the truth of the bridge, I think." He paused for a moment. "You know, Mr. Davis, that if you look from space, you can see the original Nala Sethu?"

"What?" Davis frowned. He couldn't have heard that right. "But it doesn't exist. You said so yourself."

"I said no such thing, Mr. Davis." Raban smiled again. "I said that the Ramayana was not the literal truth. The Nala Sethu in the photographs is a stretch of sandy shoals cemented by coral. It crosses the Palk Strait—just to the north of your bridge, in fact."

"Oh, come on," Davis said. "It's sand!"

"You asked for evidence, Mr. Davis," Raban said. "Here is your evidence. The sand rests on a core of granite that is 1.7 million years old—the same time as recorded in the Ramayana. It is broken in only one place."

"It has to be natural," Davis said. "One-point-seven million years ago the human race didn't exist."

"Yes." Raban smiled again. "And if you wish to believe that a thirty-kilometer, near perfectly straight line of granite stretching across the Palk Strait is a natural formation, then that is, of course, your choice. I myself would respectfully disagree. You are an engineer, Mr. Davis. Just how likely is that to happen?"

Davis stared at Raban. "Thirty kilometers? Dead straight? You're not kidding me?"

"All true, Mr. Davis. I assure you."

"It can't be." Davis said, getting a little angry. "What kind of explanation could there be for a 1.7-million-year-old bridge built by monkeys?"

"Monkeys, Mr. Davis? I never said it was built by monkeys. That is what the peasants believe." Raban's smile grew sharper. "But if it is not natural, then someone must have built it. correct? And we know there was a war. If there is a war, someone must be defeated; is it not so?"

"Who?" Davis demanded.

"Not monkeys, Mr. Davis. Not monkeys." Raban's lips curled back from his teeth so far that his smile started to turn into something else. "With the Iliad, the story was false, but the bones were true. In such a way did Schliemann find his city. So let us strip off the flesh and see what lies underneath, Mr. Davis. There was a war, and the loser was cast down—but as the Ramayana says, he could not die. The winners of the war, they cut the bridge—I told you of the missing portion of the granite—and the loser found himself trapped on the island of Lanka. Perhaps he was bound there. Chained, as it were."

"What. . .what?" Davis said, but his voice cracked and the wind whipped his words away, drowning them under the screaming of the bridge.

"Now, Mr. Davis, imagine what it would take for the loser to escape his prison. Perhaps he needs a bridge. But not just any bridge will do. He might need a bridge with meaning beyond the simply physical. A meta-bridge, as it were. An *avatara*."

Davis looked down at the procession. It had reached the ribbon. The statue of Hanuman—battered and lacking one arm—rested in front of the entrance to the bridge. Davis could see the officials walking toward the ribbon. The moment it was cut would mark the opening of the bridge, and the formal unification of Sri Lanka with India. The moment when the island became joined to the mainland.

Raban's smile now was inhumanly wide, showing row upon row of needle-tipped teeth.

"Imagine, Mr. Davis," Raban said. "Imagine what such a being might do to pass the long, long years of his imprisonment."

Davis couldn't move. He looked at Raban's teeth and he thought of the camps, the death squads, the unmarked graves, the endless war between the Tamils and the Sinhalese.

"Now imagine what he might do when he escaped. Imagine what might happen if he saw a tipping point, the world balanced on a pivot. Imagine if he. . .*pushed*." Raban laughed, and the sound was like an ice-cold fist punching Davis in the gut.

"Who are you?" he whispered, as below the officials cut the ribbon and opened the bridge.

Raban's eyes glowed, the deadly blue of Cherenkov radiation. "Not a monkey."

Davis saw something flash down from the clouds to the west to impale the city of Ramanathapuram, and a moment later the first of the nuclear fireballs bloomed on the horizon like a hideous flower.

And as the bridge and Davis screamed, Ravana laughed and laughed and laughed. ☙

Euan Harvey is a writer. He lives in Thailand. He has a website at: **http://www.euanharvey.com**.

The Hag Queen's Curse

by M.K. Hobson
Illustration by Peter Ferguson

THERE ARE QUEENS AND THERE ARE QUEENS; THERE ARE HAGS AND THERE ARE HAGS. THERE'S BOOTY AND THERE'S BOOTY. THIS STORY HAS ALL OF THEM AND MORE.

November 1798. The Black Cat Tavern, Fells Point, Maryland

Hearthlight flickers on soot-grimy half-timbered walls. Wind and hail beat against the thick bull's-eye quarter-panes, the icy arms of the Hag Queen of Fells Point; bitter and jealous, drawing men of the sea into the warmth of the tavern to surround her, for she craves amusement.

The Hag Queen, Mother Grax, Old Salt Sea Sarah; she is known by a hundred names. In skirts of rough burlap looped up with braids of kelp, she sits at a table in the back of the Black Cat, surrounded by a half-dozen men: captains and mates, fishermen and dockworkers. Her face is brown as day-old coffee, wrinkle-chasmed; sea-green eyes glower ill-temper. The men try to amuse her with songs and chanties, flashing smiles of varying brightness, flattering her with all the same wit and charm they would use with a pretty young barmaid with apple-cheeked dimples and round heels. Their song is desperate, their faces worried and anxious ... who knows how long the sea-hag will demand amusement? An evening? A week of evenings? How much money will they lose in that time? How many fish uncaught, how many vessels unplundered, how many crates left lashed by rain and spray on the storm-creaking docks?

"Lambswool," Mother Grax demands, her voice echoing like thunder off an unseen cliff face.

"Lambswool!" The call rises in unison from three different men waving silver coins. Strong old ale is drawn and spiced with nutmeg, ginger, and sugar, and set to toast on the glowing red hob. Lambswool, the favorite sop of the Hag Queen; it is brought to her as quickly as fire will allow, set before her carefully, swirling steam bathing her cold ancient skin. She breathes in the spices appreciatively.

But before she can lift the smoke-smudged tankard to her withered lips, the door bursts open, banging against the wall with all the force of the storming winds outside. A pair of men tumble in on a howling blast of brine-spray; there is the grapple of fists and the flash of a jeweled knife.

"Cursed hide-pirate!"

"Poxy Navy blaggard!"

They roll over and over each other, each trying to gain the upper hand; they crash into the Hag Queen's table, knocking her hob-warmed ale to the ground, splashing her fishgut-stained linen apron.

Horrified silence falls heavy as a pressgang bludgeon. All eyes are on Navy, his long blue coat soaked and tangling around his knees as he raises the glimmering dagger to plunge it into the Pirate's heart…

"STOP!" The Hag Queen of Fells Point brings down the oar with a rifle-sharp report. Mutterings of Pirate and Navy fall silent. She looks between them slowly. Her eyes hold the Pirate's first.

"A hide-pirate in an old body…you will have to change soon. Already you are trembling, and not just from cold." Her oyster-colored eyes flicker sideways. "And at your throat, a fresh young man, wearing the uniform of the new Federal Navy." Rheumy eyes narrow, as she sees more deeply. "A young man with *craft* around him."

"I am Second Lieutenant John Rodgers, of the *Constellation*," Navy announces, lifting his chin proudly. "Warlock First Class."

The Hag Queen's lips twist.

"Warlock," she says.

Rodgers twists the knife against the pirate's throat. "I have orders to bring this miscreant to the Navy's justice!"

The Hag Queen's eyes narrow meanly, and there are ugly flickers in her eyes, like the pincers of a hundred tiny crabs tearing apart a bloated fish on the sea bottom.

"Be that as it may," the Hag Queen says softly. "You've upset my Lambswool."

"*Ale,* madam?" the young Warlock's eyes blaze with indignation. "You are addressing an officer of the United States Navy! Your ale doesn't matter one whit to me!"

"Ah, misery," the pirate mutters, as the Hag Queen's face contorts with rage.

"*Ultima Thule*!" she commands, bringing the oar down with a clap of thunder.

1986. Salty's, Newport, Oregon

Colored shadows from the square-tiled disco floor flash against finger-grimed black walls. There is a mirror ball and a pair of cute bartenders who are always squabbling. Two tall Marshall stacks in each corner thump out a beat you can feel all along Bay Boulevard. Jeff and Kat come down to Salty's every Saturday night because in Newport, Oregon, in 1986 there's nothing else to do on a Saturday night if you haven't the taste for pickup trucks, country music, and mullets.

Always the same people. Skinny transient boys with names like Etienne and Colby; they spasm on the dance floor, get up intrigues in dark corners, pass little plastic packages of white powder from hand to hand. Always the same music: Adam Ant, Depeche Mode, Dead or Alive, Culture Club, The Cure. Always the same table, the wobbly dark one in the back with the red glass candleholder. Kat likes to dip her black fingernails in the melted wax and then peel it off like dead skin. It creeps Jeff out.

Jeff dresses preppy in pastel Izods and pressed chinos. He drinks piña coladas and saves the paper umbrellas. Kat wears black, sips Manhattans through crimson-painted lips, and smokes clove cigarettes in a long, jeweled holder.

Every Saturday, it's the same.

Until the pirate.

They even have the same fight. For the past year, they've been saving up cash to get to San Francisco. Jeff's got friends there, and there are jobs to be had in record stores, and there are bigger and better clubs, and bigger and better opportunities. Kat's dreams for San Francisco are bizarre but vague; she's thinking of hitting big in the roller derby or as a professional dominatrix. Jeff's ambitions are more specific but only slightly less bizarre; he wants to meet the accountant of his dreams and open an H&R Block tax-preparation outlet with him. Divergent (indeed, diametrically opposed) dreams notwithstanding, they both agree escaping to San Francisco is the way to go.

Toward that end, Jeff takes exactly twenty percent of his small paycheck and puts it into a savings account at U.S. Bank. Until recently, Kat has been doing the same. But lately, things haven't been going quite as she planned.

"So, are we going to make a deposit this month?" Jeff broaches the subject like a mommy asking a stubborn child whether she's washed her hands after using the toilet.

"Yeah," Kat scratches the side of her nose. "About that…"

Jeff flicks his paper umbrella with his fingernail, hisses a pent-up breath.

"*Brady*?"

Kat blushes. She's embarrassed, but she hides it under anger.

"Yeah, *Brady*," she says.

Jeff opens his mouth to start to say something. He's going to tell her off, like he always does, like he's been doing every Saturday night for the past six months. But then, he doesn't. He just shakes his head. It makes Kat's heart shudder.

"We'll get to San Francisco, Jeff," she says. "Eventually. But these things take time. We can't just up and go."

"Yes we can," Jeff says. "If we have money."

"We'll *have* money…"

"Not as long as Brady's around." Jeff looks at her for a long time, and then says, with great gravity: "I love you, Kat. But not enough to get stuck here waiting for you."

"Jeez!" She rolls her eyes, gives him a teasing half-smile, tries to bury the awkward moment in camp. "Somebody's been hitting the Falcon Crest again. Lighten *up*, Jane Wyman."

"Whatever," Jeff says.

She touches his hand and looks deep into his brown eyes and thinks, *Really. No fooling. I promise.*

It's a special bond they've had since the fourth grade, this ability to speak mind to mind. And it's always been their version of make-up sex, the most intimate connection possible between fag and hag. But even in his thoughts, Jeff bites back bitterly:

What. Ever.

Kat pulls her hand back as if she's been singed.

Typically, at the end of this particular fight, Kat storms off into the bathroom to "fix" her "lipstick" (the finger quotes are Jeff's; he once employed them with amusement, now they are used with some dismay). This time, however, instead of storming, she reels, pushing past a pair of beautiful boys in plaid shirts.

Things aren't broken between them. There are ways of fixing any problem. They'll get to San Francisco. Jeff will see.

Kat goes to bolster her delusions. Jeff fumes and begins calculating how long it will take to get to San Francisco without her. Adventure is forestalled, as it always is.

Until the pirate.

About two seconds after Kat runs off into the bathroom, a pirate jostles down into the seat next to Jeff, wobbling the table, threatening to topple Jeff's carefully nursed piña colada. The guy has gone the whole nine leagues: face paint, little satin bows in his hair, a waistcoat with acres of gold braided trim and brilliantly gold buttons.

Adam Ant, bless his heart, has a lot to answer for.

Jeff wishes that Kat were close enough to share this catty observation mind to mind. But all cynicism and mockery soon vanish as the pirate's golden eyes meet his, and they dance with spinning silver coins of mirror ball light. They brim with greed and lust and hunger, with promises of devastation and devouring. The pirate licks his lips slowly, and Jeff is suddenly *very* glad that Kat is in the bathroom, because even though their bond is very special, it sure as hell isn't special enough for the thoughts he's having now.

"Raining hard out there, huh?" Jeff's voice has gone all weak. Besides the smell of cold November rain, the pirate's long woolen coat smells of old cedar and creosote and fishy mud, like he went down clamming under the pier before coming to cruise Salty's. "You looking to…ah…plunder some booty?"

The pirate stares at him like he's an idiot. Which he is, for trotting out the *worst* pickup line in the entire history of pickup lines.

"Show me your feet," the pirate says.

Jeff exhales. *Saved by the foot fetish!* he thinks, wondering if he should be relieved or alarmed.

Jeff extends a foot from under the table, sliding off one of his

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black tennis shoes as he does. He places it gently in the pirate's lap. The pirate lays one cool hand on it, fingers stroking the sock, feeling along the instep. The pirate nods with satisfaction.

"Come with me," he says. "There is a dark alley in back."

Jeff's heart gives a leap, and he's just getting his shoe back on when the pirate crumples in pain, doubling over. He moans in agony, his face waxes pale and clammy. Jeff lays a hand on his back.

"Are you all right? Do you want something to drink?"

"Hot rum…" the pirate breathes out longingly, licking his lips as if the words themselves taste good.

"How could I *not* have known?" Jeff is about to lift his hand to call out to one of the bartenders when the pirate peers at him, his gaze like light filtering down to the ocean floor from high above.

"…but there is no *time*."

Suddenly, Jeff smells something else layered over the smell of wet wool and old cedar and creosote. The smell of rot. Human rot, flesh decaying from within. Jeff pulls back, but the pirate lays a bony hand on his arm. In a low insinuating voice, the pirate mutters:

"Prepare to be boarded."

In any other circumstance, Jeff might have felt relieved that the pirate actually came up with an even *worse* pickup line than he did. But everything goes black, and he doesn't feel anything.

Kat comes out of the bathroom, crimson lipstick edged Clara Bow crisp, sniffing and wiping her nose. She feels much brighter and more elegant than she did when she went in. She has wangled the promise of drama, excitement, and thrills out of a little plastic bag in her vintage 1940s beaded purse. She's forgiven Jeff for harping on uncomfortable details. She's forgiven Brady for *being* an uncomfortable detail. She's forgiven everybody everything.

Then she notices the ruckus around the table.

Her table.

Her and Jeff's table.

Alarm rings in her newly brass skull.

There's a body stretched out on the floor. One of the squabbling bartenders, who calls himself Patti and is an EMT by day, bends over a still form.

But the guy stretched out on the floor isn't Jeff. It's some half-baked new-romantic tweaker she's never seen before. He's pale and clammy, with cheeks like hollowed out bowls.

"Who's he?" Kat asks Patti, as she looks around for Jeff. It's not like Jeff to let strange pirates pass out under their table.

"He's *dead,* that's who!" Patti says. He holds up the pirate's ring-sparkling hand. When Patti releases it, it remains stiff and frozen, clutching for the sky. "See that? Rigor mortis! That doesn't happen until you're dead for hours…but I just saw him talking to Jeff!"

"Where did Jeff go?"

"I don't know, he was here just a minute ago…damn it, turn that shit off! Have a little respect! Jesus!"

Some wag has punched up "Stand and Deliver" and people have started dancing again. Patti huffs angrily to the bar and jerks

the jukebox plug out of the wall. He flips on fluorescent ceiling lights, bathing the bar in unflattering brilliance. He ignores groans and complaints and ostentatiously hand-shaded eyes as he picks up the phone. Kat scans the dance floor, hoping to see Jeff's lanky form among the complainers, but in the newly bright light, her eyes are drawn back to the dead pirate guy. She can't help noticing that he's wearing the awesomest pair of thigh-high leather boots she's ever seen. She bends for a closer look. She notices a broken piña colada glass, the spilled remnants of the sweet drink. A paper umbrella, unsaved.

And then, the pirate crumbles. Collapses. Caves in like a carelessly touched mummy, leaden gray dust mixing with pineapple juice and coconut milk and rum.

"For God's sake!" Patti screeches from across the bar, covering the phone's mouthpiece with a trembling hand. "Kat, what the hell did you *do?"*

"I was just looking at his boots," Kat whispers, pulling back. Suddenly, she is *really* worried about Jeff.

She throws on her chain-jangling spiked motorcycle jacket and heads outside into the cold November slop. The arch of the Yaquina Bay Bridge rises dark at the end of the road, red and white lights blinking across it. At 3 a.m. the lights are infrequent.

She sees Jeff immediately.

Strangely enough, it appears he's in the middle of kicking the shit out of Wolfgang Amadeus Mozart.

That is, there's a guy in a tattered white wig and a long, narrow-shouldered coat curled up on the ground in front of Jeff, and Kat's never seen him before unless you count that one time she and Jeff rented *Amadeus,* 'cause the guy looks like Tom Hulce half-dead during *The Magic Flute.*

Jesus, this Saturday just keeps getting weirder.

Jeff is soaked to the skin. A heavy piece of wood drags his arms down. He's breathing hard, flushed with pleasurable exertion.

"This is Ultima Thule, then?" Jeff stops trying to kill Mozart long enough to roar the question. "This is where the Hag has banished us for our disturbance? *How are we to return, Warlock? How is the Curse to be broken?"*

"I know not." Mozart hides under his arms, and his voice is muffled. "I swear it."

Jeff sneers a scornful laugh.

"That's to be your last lie, Navy," he says. "I've commandeered me a *bonny* new vessel…strong enough to kill you. And I won't miss my chance a second time!"

"Jeff! Stop it!"

Kat tries to pull him back, wrapping both her hands around his upper arm. His skin is cold and rain-slicked, and she can feel the familiar outlines of his mind. But something is very wrong. Jeff is there, but he is tiny, small, imprisoned. Something else is filling the space of his mind, something bitter and old and cruel.

Something not Jeff, not Jeff at all.

Kat, Jeff howls. *Kat, help me!*

He growls and strikes back at her with the wood in his hand. She falls hard, jacket-chains clanking on wet pavement. Jeff takes another step toward her, wood raised, but Mozart is on his feet now. He has something in his hand that glints.

"Back, you foul creature!" He lifts it before himself. Jeff freezes. He stands stock still for a long time, then lets the wood drop from his hands. It clatters in the still ocean-scented darkness.

"Until dawn, Warlock," Jeff whispers, inclining his head.

Then he turns and vanishes into the darkness.

It becomes quickly apparent that Mozart blew his last ounce of strength on that heroic gesture. With a moan, he crumples to the ground, cradling his gut. Kat bends over him, sees that his face is bleeding.

"Do you want me to get help? Why was he…"

"Aid, Mistress Witch." He painfully raises a hand and makes the heavy-metal devil-horn sign—index finger, pinky, and thumb extended. "I beg thee, aid."

What, you need an emergency infusion of Ozzy Osbourne?

"I am a Warlock," he continues, voice unsteady with pain. "A Second Lieutenant in the service of the United States Navy, under the direct command of Secretary Benjamin Stoddert. I am in pursuit of the Hide-Pirate Captain Flâneur. The American Mantic Code of 1784 requires that you render me aid, if you be Good…" He peers at her outfit of unbroken black, the dozens of silver rings on her fingers. His eyes linger on the upside-down pentagram around her throat. He frowns slightly. "… and if you be Ill, then I pray thee inform me now, that I might destroy you."

She gives him the slow skeptical up-and-down she learned from a drag queen named Frank.

"Are you *Good?"* he hisses through clenched teeth.

"Mostly," she grins.

The man nods.

"Forgive my rough manner. The magic with which the Hag sent us here was powerful and indelicate, and my senses have not yet accustomed themselves to this place." He squints at the harsh white streetlight above them, at the cars flying over the Yaquina Bay Bridge, and his pale brow wrinkles apprehensively. *"Ultima Thule.* The Hag's Curse is truly formidable."

"Hag's curse?" She's crouched down before him, one elbow propped on her knee. "What is that, some kind of acid? How much did you take?"

Kat has formulated a theory. She's good at formulating theories. Newport is always getting bad acid from California. This guy is obviously some freaked out history major from a college town—Eugene, maybe. So this freaked out history major with a headful of bad acid just happens to be in Newport (God only knows why) and he comes into Salty's. And, for whatever reason, maybe he thinks Jeff is cute, he drops some bad acid in Jeff's piña colada. And Jeff freaks out and beats the shit out of him.

All while she's in the bathroom for five minutes "fixing" her "lipstick."

Nope. No use. Even bringing bad acid and history majors into the mix can't account for the mysterious dust-collapsing pirate. Her head is beginning to ache. Her Saturday night has gotten too dramatic. She digs in her bag for her Djarums. Her fingers brush the little plastic packet of white powder; she fondles it longingly.

But then, there's the chirp of a siren and bright spinning lights speeding down the hill toward the bay front. Kat startles, closing her vintage beaded purse quickly. Kat hopes Patti has the presence of mind to snag those awesome boots before he lets the

cops in with yellow tape and a dustbuster.

"So many lights…" the man murmurs.

Quickly, Kat helps the Warlock (or acid-head, or history major, or whatever) to his feet. If he's walking, maybe he won't pass out. He leans against her; she gives him a shake.

"Hey, you got a name?"

"John Rodgers," he mumbles. "Second Lieutenant. *Constellation*. Serial number…"

Then he passes out.

Kat sighs. So much for keeping him walking and talking.

Luckily, Kat is a sturdy girl. And the Warlock (or acid-head, etc.) is really rather slight. She picks him up and slings him over her shoulder, tucking her purse under her arm.

"By the way, I'm not a Witch," she mutters, as she makes her way up Hatfield Drive.

Back at her apartment, Kat settles the Warlock on her broken-down couch so she can get a better look at him.

He's wearing a long, narrow-chested coat, dyed a dark woad blue; it's got silver epaulettes and tarnished brass buttons. A grimy cobweb-colored peruke is twisted on his skull showing cropped curling brown hair underneath. He looks a few oranges short of scurvy, but he's not entirely uncute. But his boots, Kat notes, aren't anywhere near as cool as the pirate's.

He begins to stir under her scrutiny; she throws a blanket over him and goes to get him coffee, aspirin, and the bong, in that order.

"What did he mean, until dawn?" she asks.

*"If dawn's light touches you in Ultima Thule, then never shall you return…*Those were the last words the Hag said to us."

Having given him the coffee and the aspirin, she retrieves her baggie of weed from its carefully chosen hiding place—with Brady around, it's the only way she can keep any for herself. The lighter and bong are impenetrable to the Warlock; she decides to teach by example, bubbling up a deep breath of acrid smoke.

"General Washington's herb?" He sniffs as Kat releases a lungful. "In Ultima Thule? The books tell us that there is no manner of enjoyment in this place, only tedium and stagnation."

She hands him the bong, and he proves an apt pupil. After a couple of deep inhalations, he melts back into the couch, obviously feeling much better. He'll have some damn fine bruises, but it doesn't seem that Jeff has broken any of his bones.

Just associating the concepts "Jeff" and "breaking his bones" heightens the unpleasant feeling of having stepped sideways out of reality, a feeling that's been building all night. Kat lights a Djarum and is about to ask for a detailed and satisfactory explanation when Brady comes out of the bedroom, scratching his belly.

Brady is smack-skinny and orange-haired, with a face that is prematurely creased and arms that have veins like fuse cord. His tattoos glow in the light of the fridge.

"Dude…we're almost out of beer," he grumbles by way of a hello. He pads out into the front room, regarding the Warlock as he takes a deep swig. "Who the hell is this?"

"Second Lieutenant John Rodgers," the Warlock offers, eyeing Brady warily. He touches an insignia over his breast. "Warlock First Class, United States Navy."

Brady snorts a laugh, and beer comes out of his nose. He wipes it off with his hand, flicks droplets off his fingers onto the carpet.

"Dude, you got the fruitiest friends. *Warlock*. Fuck yeah."

"There is nothing unusual about my profession," Rodgers glares at Brady as he exhales smoke in a thin stream. When he speaks again, his voice is raspy. "Forgive me, but I have not had the favor of your name, Mistress Witch. I assume that it is not 'dude.'"

"Kat," she says quickly. "Kathleen."

"So, what, you're from medieval times, knights and castles and shit like that?" Brady sits down next to Rodgers, grabbing the bong and the baggie. Kat represses a sigh; that's the last she'll see of *that* bag. Rodgers does not favor Brady with an answer, but rather inclines his head toward Kat with extravagant formality.

"Mistress Kathleen," he says, speaking her name with the gravitas of a title. "I am pleased to know you. I have been given the duty of apprehending the Hide-Pirate Captain Flâneur, and I would appreciate your help in achieving that end."

"Hide-Pirate?"

"Aye. A barbarous rogue, a thieving wretch. He does not steal wooden vessels; rather he steals vessels of flesh, robs them, leaves them destitute."

"So…he stole Jeff's body?"

Rodgers nods.

"He has seized the bodies of rich merchants from Charleston to Boston, looting them of all their earthly possessions, even down to the gems on their fingers."

Brady coughs a cackle; it degenerates into a hacking fit.

"If he stole Jeff's body, he's got the wrong vessel of flesh," Brady finally manages. "Fucking Jeff's a fucking manager at fucking Arby's, dude."

"Arby's?" Rodgers looks at Kat.

"Jeez, I could really go for some curly fries right now," Brady adds. "You got any cash on you, Kat?"

Kat takes a drag on the clove cigarette, blows smoke in Brady's direction.

"The point is," she says to Rodgers, "Jeff isn't rich. He hasn't got gem one. So why did this hide-pirate steal his body?"

"Captain Flâneur took it because he had no choice. He can only stay in a body for thirteen cursed hours before he must enter a new one. When the Hag banished us from Fell's Point, Captain Flâneur had already been in his previous body for the allotted time. When we woke in Ultima Thule, he was desperate. He went into the first place that smelled of men."

"Well, there's probably not a place in Newport that smells more like men than Salty's." Kat taps a black-glossed fingertip on her lower lip. "But who's this Hag? And what's this Ultima Thule you keep talking about? This isn't Ultima Thule, it's Newport, Oregon."

"Ultima Thule is not a specific place," Rodgers clarifies. "Rather, it is a definition. A designation. Ultima Thule is the most desolate, tedious, and forsaken place in space and time—the furthest reach from true civilization and culture that has ever existed or will ever exist. It is a prison of lost souls, a trap for the unfortunate."

"Jesus, you and that faggot Jeff, the same bullshit," Brady says. "Cheap drugs from California, cops that can't find their asses with both hands… Newport is fucking *awesome,* dude!"

He takes another hit of the bong, then wedges it between his

legs like a monstrous erection. Under other circumstances, Kat might find this incredibly sexy and transgressive; at this moment, however, she just finds it creepy and gross.

"So, you're a magician or whatever?" Brady says, peering at Rodgers. "Show me a trick."

"Oh, *gladly,"* Rodgers says. He makes a strange sign with his hands, culminating in a cutting motion across his chest and a few odd finger wiggles. *"Incisio camisium...vos irreverens baro!"*

There's a strange moment, like the whole world folding then unfolding in an instant, and the smell of brimstone. And suddenly, Brady's got a shirt on. It's a long loose linen shirt, like something Fabio would wear on the cover of a Harlequin romance novel.

"Cool!" Kat leaps forward to finger the material. Rodgers smiles proudly. Brady, on the other hand, is doing his best impression of being unimpressed.

"Yeah, what the fuck ever," he says, swatting Kat's hand aside. "Fucking fruity friends, Jesus."

"Truly, Mistress Kathleen, I regret that you must inhabit such an inhospitable place." Rodgers climbs to his feet, straightens his torqued peruke and brushes stray flakes of chiba from the front of his coat. "I thank you for the restoratives you have offered me. But time is short. I must return to a brighter period, and I must take Captain Flâneur with me so that he can be submitted to the Navy's justice."

"Yeah, nice meeting you," Brady says. "Don't let the door hit your magical ass on the way out."

"Wait!" Kat catches the Warlock by a frayed elbow. "You can't just leave! What about Jeff? How are you going to find him?"

"To find him will not be difficult," Rodgers says. "To capture him will be harder. And to return with him will be hardest of all."

"Start with easy," she says.

"I must return to the tavern where Captain Flâneur boarded him, and retrieve the dust of his former body. With it, I can scry where he has gone."

She glances at her watch. 3:30 a.m.

"They'll be closed by now," she says. "If they didn't close early on account of all the weirdness. I'll go down there with you. Maybe they left the bathroom window open or something…"

"Your help would be invaluable…that is, if you've nothing better to…"

"Oh no," Kat says quickly. "Not at all, nothing…"

"Now, *kids*." Brady's voice is a condescending wheedle as he puts himself between them. Kat is surprised to realize she and the Warlock were actually standing very close together. But now Brady's in between them, putting his arms around their shoulders and pulling them in even closer. He puts his arm especially tight around the Warlock's neck, and gives it a wrench that's unconvincingly companionable. "If there's anyone in Newport, Oregon who can bust into a bar at 3 a.m., it's me. And besides, we're out of beer."

Kat frowns. Brady's gotten his mitts on her hidden stash of pot; she expected him to stay home and gloat over it. She kinda wishes he would. There is a similar sentiment in the Warlock's eyes. After a long awkward silence, the dissuasive nature of which Brady seems uniquely impervious to, she shrugs her way from under his embrace.

"What *ever*," she mutters.

"Sweet!" He reaches for his camo jacket with the Black Flag logo on the back. "Let's stop by Arby's on the way. I'm, like, fucking *dying* for some curly fries."

Brady is really good at picking locks; he swears it's a skill he learned from his dad who learned it from his friend who lived in a trailer with this guy who'd escaped from the state pen in Salem. But he likes kicking things more, and besides, he doesn't have enough money for a real lock-picking kit, so when they get to the back door of Salty's he just lifts his Doc Marten and lets fly at the thin plywood.

"I could have done *that*," the Warlock mutters.

"Pfft," Brady says as he steps through the wreckage.

"A boot's not the only thing that will break a door," the Warlock says, fingers twitching. Kat pinches him to distract his attention. Jesus, what a Saturday. Best friend possessed by the spirit of an eighteenth century pirate. Boyfriend about to throw down with a Warlock. And (she looks down into the grease-stained box in her hand) she's all out of curly fries.

She flicks on the fluorescent lights and they look around. Brady leaps over the bar and heads straight for the beer taps, sticking his head under one and pulling the big plastic handle.

As Kat predicted, the floor has been recently dust-busted, but there is a sticky film of piña colada with dust stuck to it in the shape of a pirate body. She goes behind the counter, opens the secret cupboard where Patti keeps a stash of porn and Reese's Peanut Butter Cups. Bingo. The dustbuster is there. And (she squeals with delight) so are the boots. She reaches for them reverently. In an instant, she's experiencing God in boot form. She smoothes her fingers over the buttery leather, embroidered, quilted, fringed. They even have Cuban heels.

"Made by the finest cobbler in Paris," Rodgers says as he eyes the boots. "I've been chasing the rogue for on three months now, and he always manages to find vessels that fit his boots. He is surprisingly devoted to his footwear."

"A man after my own heart," Kat says. She releases a small, thrilled squeal; she's gotten a better look at the embroidery, and has discovered that it's all little skulls and crossbones. She kicks off her shoes, hikes up her skirts, and begins yanking up the pirate's boots over her black-stockinged legs. Rodgers blushes and lifts an eyebrow.

"But we're not here for the boots, if you recall."

Kat grins sheepishly as she hands him the dustbuster and shows him how to open it. The corpse-dust in the chamber is faintly sparkly, as if soutache and gold-braid had been pulverized along with bone and skin. Rodgers tips it all out onto the floor, smoothes it into a tortilla-shape, then begins drawing patterns in it. There's the glow of magic, casting Rodgers's face into shadow.

"He's close!" Rodgers's face is painted with concern; he looks around the bar. "Closer than…"

There's the sound of glass breaking, then the feeling of cold air and a low laugh.

"'ow like you, Navy. Always a step behind." Kat whirls. Jeff is standing right behind them. Pirate Jeff, with a killer French

accent.

He looks amazingly evil, or is that just the Hamm's sign flashing behind him, giving him a red halo? While Kat and friends were smoking out and eating curly fries, Pirate Jeff was obviously knocking over a Goodwill. He's wearing a swirling black trenchcoat, a ruffled gold-lamé shirt unbuttoned to the navel, and a whole costume-jewelry box of glittering trinkets. Evil looks good on Jeff, Kat is surprised to realize. When she gets her Jeff back, she'll insist that he wear pale foundation and face paint and eyeliner more often.

That is, if she gets him back. Because even though he looks *fantastic*, he's still evil. This becomes chillingly clear when he looks at her, his eyes daggers of malevolent ice.

"'ag," he sneers, arching an eyebrow, "you 'ave stole my *boots*."

And with one balled fist, he smacks her across the face. He's so quick, she doesn't see it coming. She tumbles backward, world spinning. She hears Brady launch himself at Pirate Jeff with a mosh-pit holler; he's a Black-Flag blur of testosterone and Hamm's fumes.

And with one balled fist, he smacks her across the face. He's so quick, she doesn't see it coming. She tumbles backward, world spinning. She hears Brady launch himself at Pirate Jeff with a mosh-pit holler; he's a Black-Flag blur of testosterone and Hamm's fumes. When she can finally focus again, she's on her hands and knees, jaw aching.

And Jeff is kicking the shit out of Brady.

This obviously astonishes Brady no end, because his eyes are wide and confused as he clumsily tries to defend against Pirate Jeff's super-fast attacks. Pirate Jeff has got *moves,* and they're dirty moves; kicks to the inside of the knee, hand-chops to the windpipe, fingernails to the eyelids. Brady's on the floor moaning in about two seconds flat. That's when the gut-kicking commences. Kat scrambles to her feet, fighting dizziness, grasping desperately for Jeff's hand, trying to keep him—or at least, the demon possessing him—from rupturing her boyfriend's internal organs.

When her hand touches Jeff's, she feels Jeff's consciousness, distant and anxious, but full of purpose.

The boots, Kat.

Pirate Jeff wrenches his hand away from her grasping, and is about to clock her again when Rodgers seizes him from behind. The Warlock seizes Pirate Jeff's head between his hands in a vice grip and begins muttering spells. The air glows blue and gold around them. It's clear that the Warlock expects this to result in some pretty spectacular pirate-subduing, but Pirate Jeff just smiles secretly, and with an easy backward jerk of his elbows knocks the Warlock to the ground. Rodgers lands with a whuff, eyes astonished.

"How could it be! No one could withstand such an attack!"

Pirate Jeff whirls, lips pursed in an elegant sneer.

"But you see, I am *protected."* Pirate Jeff reaches over, grabs a handful of Kat's hair, gives her a good, mean shake. "The 'ag, she 'as dominion over the souls of all seafaring men. A man she respect and love, 'e is *protected* by 'er. Your spells are nothing against 'er power."

Rodgers's eyes narrow.

"You no see, Warlock?" says Pirate Jeff. "She ees no kindly maiden witch 'elping you out of decent respect for your craft. This ees a *'ag*."

Rodgers looks at Kat, aghast. *"You?"*

"I've never much liked that term," Kat says, struggling against Pirate Jeff's grasp. "I prefer *gay man in a woman's body*."

"Then that's why you came back," Rodgers nods, not taking his eyes off the Pirate.

"A 'ag sent us here…" Pirate Jeff begins.

"And a hag can send us back," the Warlock completes.

"A 'ag can send *ME* back," Pirate Jeff clarifies.

"All right, leaving aside the fact that I don't like being called a hag," Kat says, "what makes you think I'm going to help you?"

There is the flash of silver, and suddenly something cold and sharp is pressing against her throat. A Ginsu knife, another acquisition from Goodwill, no doubt.

"There's this," the Pirate whispers in her ear, sending shivers down her spine.

"If you hurt her, she'll never send us back," Rodgers barks. Kat can see that there is concern in his eyes. How sweet. She would send him a mosh note with little sparklepen hearts on it if there wasn't a knife pressed against her jugular.

"She does not have to. I may not be *un homme magique,* but I know 'er blood can be used," Pirate Jeff says. "I offer you a deal. With 'er blood, you can work the magic that will return us both to our own time. We will call a truce to pursue our…mutual goal. Once we 'ave returned, our game of cat and mouse can resume."

"You'd have to kill her," the Warlock speaks through clenched teeth. "I will have none of it, you murdering fiend."

"Ah, but if it is a *fait accompli…*?" Pirate Jeff says, and Kat feels the knife dig into her flesh. He's making the move that will open her throat. She makes a high sound of panic, seizes his wrist with both hands, feels Jeff…*her* Jeff…struggling against the Pirate for all he's worth.

Goddamn it, Kat! her Jeff screeches within her mind. *The boots! I told you! The boots!*

Images flash in her mind, images scavenged from the consciousness of the Pirate. Kat suddenly understands. She lifts her foot, taps the toe smartly on the floor. This depresses a secret button that only the Pirate knows is there. A stiletto shoots from the heel. With a cry, she buries this in Pirate Jeff's shin.

Pirate Jeff howls, and inside him, *her* Jeff howls too…but it's enough. His grasp slackens enough so that she can twist out from under the knife. There's a deep bleeding scratch under her jawline; she feels warm blood trickling down along her throat, between her breasts. Stingy…but not lethal.

Pirate Jeff recovers quickly, and is grasping for her, but now the Warlock is on his feet, launching himself in a flying tackle. Warlock and Pirate go down together, rolling on the beer-sticky floor, yelling insults.

"Barbarous body-stealing rogue!"

"Poncy Navy dog!"

And at that moment, Kat suddenly remembers something the Pirate said.

The'ag, she 'as dominion over the souls of all seafaring men.

It's time to start dominating, Kat thinks.

"ALL RIGHT, YOU TWO, CUT IT OUT!"

She issues the command in a thundering voice, putting all her power into the words. She's amazed at the sudden echoing resonance of her own voice, of the glow that surrounds her, whipping her hair and skirts into froth like something out of a Stevie Nicks video. Pirate and Warlock cease their grappling, look up at her with astonishment.

"Ah, misery," the Pirate mutters, and the tone of defeat in his voice makes her realize that she's got him…and he knows it. She straightens, lifting her chin, enjoying the surge of power. The astonishment on Rodgers's face turns to delight.

"I humbly thank you, madame," he says, bowing his head. "And now, by your leave, I will do what I have come to do. Capture Captain Flâneur for once and for all."

"Make it so, my good man!" Kat lifts a hand and speaks haughtily, enjoying her sudden queenly hag-dom. But her enjoyment of the play-acting turns to horror as Rodgers reaches into his coat and pulls out the jeweled thing she saw him use to scare off the Pirate before. Now she sees what it is: a jeweled, sharp dagger.

"What the hell are you doing?" she says in alarm.

"To capture Captain Flâneur… I have to stab his vessel through the heart." Rodgers says with all the casualness of "I have to shampoo his hair" or "I have to trim his nails."

"You mean *Jeff?"* Kat screeches. When the Warlock says nothing, Kat shakes her head. "That is *so* not cool."

"Captain Flâneur resides in the heart of his victim. If the enchanted steel of this dagger pierces the heart, Captain Flâneur will be imprisoned in it."

"Which still leaves my best friend Jeff with a dagger in his heart." She lifts her chin again, assumes her most commanding and imperious tone. "Thou shalt not do it, thou varlet!"

"I must," Rodgers says. "If I must match arts with you I shall, Mistress Hag!" He raises his hand in the Ozzy Osbourne devil sign again, and Kat isn't sure whether to assume a karate stance or cross her wrists like Wonder Woman.

"Isn't there any other way?"

"Not here, not in this time, this place," Rodgers says. "Perhaps if I got him back to Maryland, to a gathering of Elder Warlocks… but there is no time. Captain Flâneur can reside in a body only thirteen cursed hours, and by my reckoning it has already been eleven. I must take him now, while he is still attached to this body…"

At that moment, Brady stirs, moaning.

"Jesus Fuckme Christ," are his first words. "What the hell got into your homo, dude?"

Both Kat and Rodgers look at Brady with equal disdain. Then, suddenly, an idea comes all over Kat and makes her smile.

"Well, what if I give you an extra thirteen hours to work with?" she says.

Transferring the Pirate into Brady's body isn't hard; Kat has dominion over the souls of all seafaring men, after all, and all she has to do is lay one hand on Jeff's body and one hand on Brady's hand. It's like a Vulcan mind-meld. They make sure Brady is unconscious before this process commences; Rodgers seems more than pleased to do the job of knocking him back out with one eloquently barked magical command.

Kat bends over Jeff as he wakes.

"God, what did I do last night?" he groans, lifting a hand to his aching head.

"You don't want to know," Kat says. "Suffice it to say, it involved a pirate, curly fries, and magic."

"Kat, you're all bloody!" Jeff is looking at her throat with horror. Then he moves, winces, and looks down at his own leg. "And I'm bloody too! And I'm dressed like…Adam Ant!"

"Madame Hag," Rodgers interjects respectfully, "dawn approaches rapidly."

"Who's he?" Jeff says, looking the Warlock up and down. "And what is he doing with *Brady*?"

Kat sees that Rodgers has used rope from the wall to truss Brady up fifteen ways until Sunday. The Warlock's got a way with knots, Kat notices with a pleasant shiver. All that Navy training.

"Jeff, this is Lieutenant John Rodgers, Warlock First Class," she says. "He's taking Brady to Maryland in 1768 to get a Pirate out of his heart."

"Oh," Jeff says.

She goes over to where the Warlock is standing. He looks down at Brady, who is struggling and making noises of muffled outrage.

"I can send him back when the Elder Warlocks are done with him," he says. Kat shrugs diffidently.

"What *ever,"* she says. "I'm going to San Francisco."

"And me…" Rodgers ventures shyly. "You can summon me back any time you like. A hag has dominion over the life of all seafaring men."

She leans forward and brushes his ear with her lips.

"I'll feed you oranges," she whispers.

Rodgers blushes furiously. He takes her hand and presses his lips to the back, letting them linger on her skin a long time. When Rodgers and Brady are gone in a shower of sparkly magic, Jeff nods approvingly.

"He's cute," Jeff says. "And the military is a fine profession."

"We'll see," Kat says. "San Francisco first."

Jeff takes her hand, squeezes it.

Thanks.

She squeezes his hand in return, lays her head on his shoulder.

That's what hags are for, she thinks. ☙

M. K. Hobson lives in Oregon with her husband and daughter. "The Hag Queen's Curse" marks her fifth appearance in *Realms of Fantasy*. Watch for her upcoming stories in *Postscripts 19* and anthology *Haunted Legends* (Tor Books). Her first novel, *The Native Star,* is forthcoming from Bantam Spectra in summer 2010. You can find out more at **http://www.demimonde.com** or at her blog: **http://mkhobson.livejournal.com**.

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A Close Personal Relationship

by Thomas Marcinko
Illustration by John Kaiine

Many religious leaders claim to have a close personal relationship with God. Let's hope it's not as close and personal as this.

Five years into Junior's Surprise Visit, Ted got a call in his cubicle at the Department of Traditional Family Values. It was Clare of Assisi, patron saint of television since her appointment to that post by Pope Pius XII in 1958.

Ted recognized Saint Clare's phone icon immediately, but who wouldn't? Her late-night talk show had been a hit on all 10,057 American channels since Junior's return to Earth. Ted felt his teeth grind, but he turned it into a smile. He couldn't stand her show—it was so loud and happy—but of course he had to watch it. Everybody did.

Saint Clare beamed a beatific smile. "Ted Stevski?"

"Yes?" Ted's mouth dried up.

"Good news! Your Interview is this afternoon!"

Something inside Ted turned to ice. His tongue felt like a dirty gym sock. It stuck to the roof of his mouth.

"Three o'clock!" said Saint Clare. "Your place!" She leaned closer to the screen. "This is your lucky day!"

I'm finished, he thought. It's all over for me.

"Why—why thanks!" he said.

"Think nothing of it!" Saint Clare replied. "Good luck!" She logged off.

Ted's heart trip-hammered as he called up his appointment calendar and canceled everything. Next he went to e-mail Kevin, his boss, to let him know he was leaving the office early.

But Kevin must have known: *Call me. K.*, read the e-mail waiting in Ted's box.

He rang up Kevin, whose bright-eyed, smiling face sported a new beard, in imitation of Junior. He'd had his Interview last month; since then, he talked of little else.

"Looks like it's time to meet the Big Man," Kevin said. "Congratulations."

"Thanks." It didn't surprise Ted that Kevin knew. All post-Interviewees seemed to be of one mind.

"Nervous? Hey, I can understand that. But you've got nothing to worry about. My Interview went great. I came out a new man."

It seemed to Ted that Kevin hadn't changed much. But then, Kevin had always believed. He'd joined the Department in the beginning, ten years ago, before Junior's return. It seemed like a long time ago.

"Relax," Kevin said. "You've been a model employee."

Yes, thought Ted. Model employee. Great.

Ted's oilburner was parked at the far end of the Department's lot. He covered his mouth with his breathing mask and began the long walk. No point in environmental regulation these days. Junior actually ordered them repealed; He considered them a personal affront to His dictum about using up the world.

Ted still remembered the broadcast. *My Father gave you this planet to use up; you are saving it as if there actually were a tomorrow. Your lack of faith wounds Me. See?* And He'd held up his bleeding stigmata for a global audience of billions.

You couldn't help but believe.

Ted would be found out. Everybody was, sooner or later. Sure, Kevin had been a believer from day one. But not everybody. Tyrone in Accounting had been a rabid atheist. Tina in Word Processing had thought Junior was a space alien in disguise. After their Interviews, they'd come out perfect believers.

Ted didn't want that to happen to him. Why, he could not say. Surely it would be a more comfortable world, if he fit in a little better?

He wondered what happened to Jews and Muslims, Hindus and Buddhists. Ted was the kind of guy who worried about such things.

As he revved his federally mandated 32-cylinder engine, the radio automatically exploded to life with a Department-sponsored broadcast. You could turn it down but not off. He punched in his destination and as the car roared onto the freeway one of the Department spokesmen lectured the audience about the folly of pre-Junior societal behavior. As if anybody alive now dared to advocate gun control, or birth control, or equal rights for gays-lesbians-bisexuals-transgendered people, or teaching evolution.

He took a Halcion Lite from the glove compartment, choked

it down without water, leaned back in the driver's seat, and closed his eyes. Sooner or later everybody had an Interview with Junior. Everybody.

This wasn't the Second Coming Ted had expected.

As a child Ted tried hard to be devout. He loved Junior *with* all his heart, and considered Him a close personal friend. He prayed to Him whenever he was in trouble, when his mother lay dying, when his father kept hitting the bottle. Ted didn't always get what he asked for, but always figured there must be a reason.

Ted remembered the day his faith began to desert him. It was twenty years before Junior's Surprise Visit, when the people in gray came to take away his copy of *The World We Live In*, by the Editors of *Life* magazine.

He was in fifth grade, devouring the book before classes began, lingering over a panoramic fold-out page showing the Age of Dinosaurs. The men and women in gray casually strolled into the room and had a brief whispered discussion with the teacher. Ted didn't notice till the whispering grew loud. The people in gray showed papers and badges. Miss Clement bit her lip and nodded grimly. Ted froze as her footsteps clacked towards him in a classroom now otherwise silent.

"Ted," she said, leaning over him, speaking quietly but urgently. "That book is overdue from the library."

"But I just checked it out yesterday," Ted said.

She leaned closer. "Ted. I'm going to have to take the book now. You can check it out again later."

Ted looked up at the men and women in gray. They nodded and smiled at him. Their smiles were very, very sweet.

Later Ted tried to find the book again, but it had vanished from the school library, and the town library, too. In its place were books about Noah's Ark, and Jonah and the Whale, and the Tower of Babel. The pictures were nice. But it wasn't the same.

He just didn't get it. There were a billion copies of the Bible in print, and very few copies left of *The World We Live In*. Where was the threat?

He read blurry xeroxes of forbidden texts. He collected pages on dinosaurs, on astronomy, on evolution. Sometimes he hid them under the bed, and read them with a flashlight, blankets pulled over his head. Ted concluded that if Junior ever really did return to Earth, He would have nothing to do with the people who acted in His name.

Now Ted wondered if there were any nice people in Hell.

The dashboard clock read 2:54 when Ted's six-door pulled into his driveway.

Junior was sitting in Ted's favorite chair. He wore an expensive three-piece, blue pinstripe suit. His ash-blond hair was combed back, parted, and tied in a pony tail. His beard was neatly trimmed. He had put on a few pounds since his return to Earth. He wore several rings on each hand, including a pinkie ring on his right.

Ted wondered how He'd gotten past the house's security system.

"A miracle," Junior replied to Ted's unvoiced thought. Junior shrugged and looked at His fingernails. "What else? Sit down."

Ted sat. Now that they were face-to-face, he felt strangely at ease. He'd spent the last five years hiding what he really thought. Punishment was close at hand.

Junior said, "I'm not here to punish you."

"I sure don't expect You to give me a reward," Ted said. He was getting tired of hiding his thoughts. What difference did it make now?

Junior leaned forward. His ice-blue eyes burned like distant stars.

"You don't like Me, Ted. Do you?"

Ted reached for his collar and loosened the tie. He was not sure what he'd expected. But this was not it.

"I'm not sure I know what You mean," Ted replied.

Junior sighed and stood up. He put his hands in his back pockets and began to pace the room.

"I mean, it's not a question of belief," He said. "I've brought peace and prosperity to the world. This is an age of miracles. You can't help but believe I exist. That choice, I've taken away from you. But you don't believe *in* me. Do you?"

He stopped and looked Ted straight in the eye.

Ted said: "I don't suppose it would do any good to say—"

Junior whirled around. "—that you've 'been good'? Yes, you've kept all the outward signs of belief. But the time has come for you to give Us more than just your obedience."

Ted swallowed. "Isn't obedience what You want?"

Junior smiled, stuck His hands in His back pockets, looked at the ceiling, and rocked on His heels. "Well, outward signs of obedience are fine, Ted. Especially for Catholics. But we're not Catholics, are we? I'm certainly not."

Ted wiped his palms on the upholstery. "Then what is it You want?"

"Oh, I dunno, Ted. You tell Me. Like, oh, take a look at this!"

He pointed to a picture on Ted's wall. Ted had burned it for his own protection, five years ago, but now it was back, something he'd kept above his desk when he taught Intelligent Design 101, and slipped bright kids blurry photocopies about Darwin without written permission slips from their parents.

The picture was a framed print of the famous sixteenth-century woodcut. It showed a scholarly type poking his head through the dome of the heavens, staring in wonder at the gears and wheels of the greater cosmos beyond.

"This," Junior said, "fucking offends Me, if you want the truth."

"Well, I don't see why; it's only a picture…"

"'It moves, anyway,' eh, Ted?"

"What do You mean?"

"That Catholic thing again. The Church pardoned Galileo. Does that mean I have to? That guy, he fucking offended Me too."

What did He want? And how had that burned print been returned to his wall?

"I told you, a miracle. Get used to them. Now, the point is—well, let Me put it this way. I expect certain things to be taken on faith. Out of sheer adoration of Me. If I say believe, I mean believe. If I say two and two are five, believe that. You got it?"

"Certainly."

"*Certainly*," Junior replied in a mocking falsetto. He pointed to a poster on the wall. "And what is that supposed to mean?"

It was another item Ted had lost a long time ago. It showed the evolution of life, from a single cell, to simple organisms, through dinosaurs, smaller mammals, through the apes and hominids, and finally to the modern human being.

"You loved the dinosaurs more than Me," He said. "You always did."

Yes, Ted thought. But I needed to, don't you see?

If Junior heard that thought, He did not acknowledge it.

He reached into his pocket, removed something small, and tossed it.

Ted caught a small toy model of a triceratops. He turned it over and over in his fingers. It was made of blue plastic. The horns bent when he fingered them.

"This really bothers You?" Ted asked, looking up.

"Not the thing itself," said Junior. "What it stands for."

"What's that?"

Junior sighed. He flopped onto the couch, stretched out, and let his foot dangle over the back. "Let Me tell you a little story. Once upon a time there was a Son, and He had a very demanding Father. His Father asked Him to do a certain Thing, and the Son did so, even though He didn't particularly want to; even though, to tell the truth, the Son found this Task quite painful. But the Son was under the impression that after He did this Deed, people would straighten up and fly right."

A dragonfly the size of a housecat buzzed Ted's ear. Lizards glided through the air on leather wings. A tyrannosaurus feasted on pink meat. An apatosaur buoyed in a swampy lake.

Junior made a spitting noise. "Talk about your original dysfunctional family…yeah, after the Big Sleep I sat at the right hand of My Father. Not a word from Him about all I did for Him; not so much as a fucking Thanks, Son, well done. I sat there at His right hand and basked in His radiance. Which is like watching paint dry, if you ask Me. I mean, that's all it is with Him: Me, Me, Me. The Great I Am… Not that I really got along any better with my Mother. I always talked back. I couldn't help it. Everything she said seemed so inane. I think I was angry at her for being such a doormat.

"So next time, I decided to do it differently. I came back once before, in the fifteenth century. You thought that story was just fiction, only something that crazy Russian novelist dreamed up?

"Yeah, I came back for a little visit. I did a few miracles. Raised a girl from the dead. The Grand Inquisitor—old cardinal, ninety years at least—told the crowd to grab Me. They were so used to following his orders that they locked Me up! And he told Me I had no right to add to what I'd already said!

"I wasn't going to go through that again. No more run-ins with the law. No more conflict with the established order.

"Playing along with the Establishment is the one thing I've never tried. 'Render unto Caesar.' To hell with that. Render unto Me for once. How's that sound? So I made compromises. I watched their influence grow and I said to myself, Why not? My return has to benefit *somebody*. Why not them?

"At first I didn't feel quite right about it. I was still following those old codependent patterns. I felt guilty. I felt I should be giving, giving, giving.

"It turned out to be easy. It turned out to be fun. When I think of all that sacrifice, all that blood… Well, this time, we're going to do it My way. I've bled. Now it's your turn."

Ted, confused, gestured helplessly with the triceratops.

"Get that thing out of My sight!" Junior said.

Ted put it in his pocket.

Junior shook his head. "Not good enough. Look."

Ted found himself in his bedroom in the house he grew up in. Laid out before him was all the paraphernalia of his childhood, before the people in gray came after it. Models of dinosaurs, and books about them too. A map of the solar system, a chart about the evolution of the stars. A three-inch reflecting telescope, a toy gyroscope, and the Visible Man, all courtesy of the Edmund Scientific Company.

Ted's heart filled with awe. By bringing him here, Junior was showing Ted how much He understood him.

Junior looked at it all and frowned, and shook His head, and gave the thumbs down.

"It's got to go."

Ted picked up an Estes model of the Saturn V rocket. "All this threatens You somehow?" He shook the rocket.

Junior shook His head. "It doesn't threaten me. It offends Me. It threatens *you*, though. Everything in this room tells me you lack faith. Some people can take or leave a universe that's billions of years old; some are fine thinking that Allah or Buddha or Vishnu are just different names for the same guy; a few believed zilch, but here I am and they're all like *Oh, my mistake*. I don't mind them so much. Whatever floats their boats. But *you*...well, during this Visit I'm demanding a sacrifice from everybody. Some people are giving up sex; some people are giving up money; some people are giving up power; some are just changing their minds. Kevin and Tyrone and Tina in Word Processing all gave up something. I'm Interviewing hundreds of other people right now, simultaneously. That's the sort of thing you can do when you're Me. And all those people? They're all making the sacrifice, because you see, Ted, thou shalt have no other gods before me.

"Some people, Ted, are giving up a worldview. And whatever sense of wonder goes with it."

Next stop—miracle—was the late Cretaceous era.

A dragonfly the size of a housecat buzzed Ted's ear. Lizards glided through the air on leather wings. A tyrannosaurus feasted on pink meat. An apatosaur buoyed in a swampy lake.

The scene wasn't even accurate, Ted realized. It was the prehistoric bestiary of his childhood, long ago supplanted by theories of quick-moving, warm-blooded lizards. But it was enough to make him stare in wonder.

He had spent hours contemplating the dinosaurs: reading

about them, drawing them, imagining them mindlessly whiling away their hundred-million-year afternoon. It was where Ted went, in his mind, when Dad stumbled home and passed out on the couch, when the news about Mom got worse and worse.

Here everything seemed friendly and clear, and when the nuns and priests tried to talk him out of this world of wonders, and replace it with Eden, Ted always wanted to say, Don't you get it? *This* was a world without sin and evil. This was Eden, or something better than Eden.

Junior was right. Ted loved the dinosaurs, more than he loved Him. Far more.

Ted loosened his tie. He was already soaked with sweat. His feet sank inches into the swamp. Water filled his shoes.

Junior, of course, looked air-conditioning cool. He knew how to deal with a body of water. He stood right on top of it. He tapped an impatient foot.

Junior clapped him on the back. "Well, Ted, kiss it all goodbye."

"You're going to destroy it?" Ted's gesture took in the entire modern universe.

"No," He said. "You are."

The hell I will, Ted thought. You sleazy, pompous, infantile excuse for a god…

"Now, is that any way to talk to Me, Ted? Me? Isn't it about time that you accepted Me as your Personal Savior, that we had a Close Personal Relationship?"

"You do this to everybody?" Ted asked. "Everybody with a mind of his own?"

"Pretty much," Junior admitted. "Watch."

White flecks filled the sky and drifted toward the ground. At first Ted thought it was snow. But as he held out his hand to catch a flake, he felt an ectoplasmic nothingness fall onto his outstretched palm.

He looked closer. It was a kind of snow, but it was more like video snow. It was blankness, negation.

The flakes were getting bigger. The world-tapestry before him was filled with holes.

Ted looked closer. Junior formed something in his hand. It was a round, white object, a snowball packed from the falling nothingness. He leaned back for a long throw and lobbed it hard, straight at the t. rex. The ball splattered and exploded against the creature's head, to cover it up like invisible paint. The white nothingness dripped down and blanketed the great gray bulk. Soon the creature was gone.

Junior made an even bigger snowball of the stuff. He shoved it into Ted's hands. "Toss. I said *toss*. I can make you do it. Look."

And without will, Ted lobbed the white ball at a docile stegosaurus that munched fronds. The white stuff covered the creature. The stegosaurus vanished.

Ted felt like he'd killed a favorite pet—not one that needed to be mercifully killed, but one that was perfectly healthy.

"I can make you do it," Junior said again. "Or you can do it as yourself. Your call."

"Why are You giving me a choice?" Ted asked. "Why not just make me do Your will and be done with it?"

Junior leaned forward. "Because I care, Ted. I care deeply. I want you to love Me of your own free will. Like Father, like Son. It's the way We've always run our business. So choose."

Yes, Ted thought. Better to do it himself. Better to do the deed to a loved one, than to have somebody else do it for you.

At least he would remember.

Ted lobbed one at a triceratops. And a tyrannosaur. He caught a pterodactyl in mid-flight. He pummeled an ankylosaur. He kept throwing.

By the end of the day his arm was sore. Exhaustion muffled his grief.

The universe he'd lived in and loved as a child was gone. In its place was a thing without form, and void.

Junior took him back to his apartment, to regale Ted with anecdotes about how He used to remind Joseph that he wasn't His real father. "His face would get all red, especially around the ears," said Junior. "That's what I remember. The ears got red as a beet, red as blood."

Ted smiled. "That's a great story, Junior."

"Oh, I've got plenty more." He slapped Ted on the back. "We're going to be great friends. I can tell."

"I'm sure too, Junior," Ted said through a tight, bright smile. "I don't know what took me so long."

"It doesn't matter, Ted. What matters is that now we have a Close Personal Relationship. Oh, look who's here," He said as he escorted Ted into the kitchen. "All your friends."

Kevin was there, and Charlie from Accounting, and Tina from Word Processing. So was Saint Clare. "Surprise!" They'd draped a banner across his living room: Congratulations On Your Interview. Junior popped open a bottle of fizzy water and took a swig.

"Water!" he cried in mock surprise. "Well, I'll fix that!"

Laughter all around.

Ted just smiled. He noticed a few people he knew but had never met: Jerry Seinfeld, Cat Stevens, Mahatma Gandhi, and Uma Thurman were blending in with the guests. That answered Ted's question about what happened to Jews, Muslims, Hindus, and Buddhists.

Junior caught Ted's eye. "Not so glum, kid," said Junior, throwing his arm around Ted. "Everything's going to be great from now on. I'll never leave you now. We'll talk later."

By the time the party broke up, Ted found another framed print on his wall. He had not noticed it before. It was done in a sixteenth-century style. It showed the dome of Heaven. A man sat beneath it and contemplated the splendor of the skies beneath the dome, beyond which was blank nothingness. The man seemed happy in his little universe.

Ted began to wonder if he shouldn't try to follow this example.

He never managed to do it. Junior never took him back to the prehistoric garden, either.

And like everybody else, Ted lived forever. ❧

Thomas Marcinko was born in Pennsylvania and now lives in Arizona. His fiction has appeared in *Interzone, Lady Churchill's Rosebud Wristlet, Science Fiction Age,* on Ellen Datlow's EventHorizon.com website, and most recently in *Bites of Passion: An Anthology of Vampire Erotica,* edited by Cecilia Tan (Ravenous Romance).

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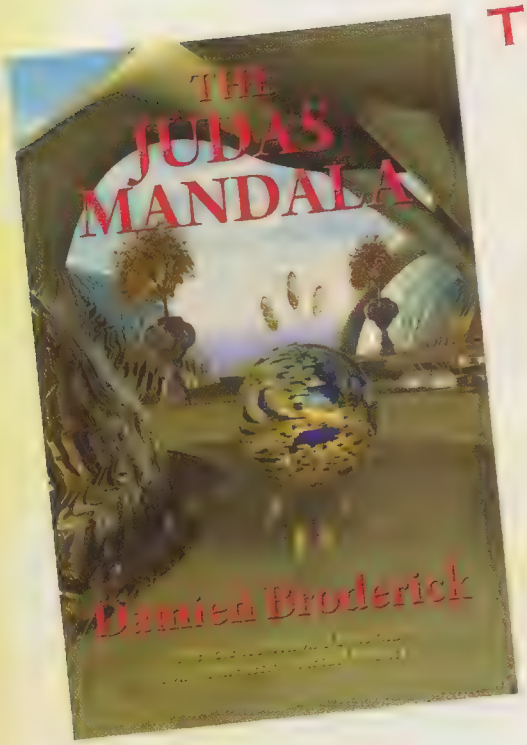

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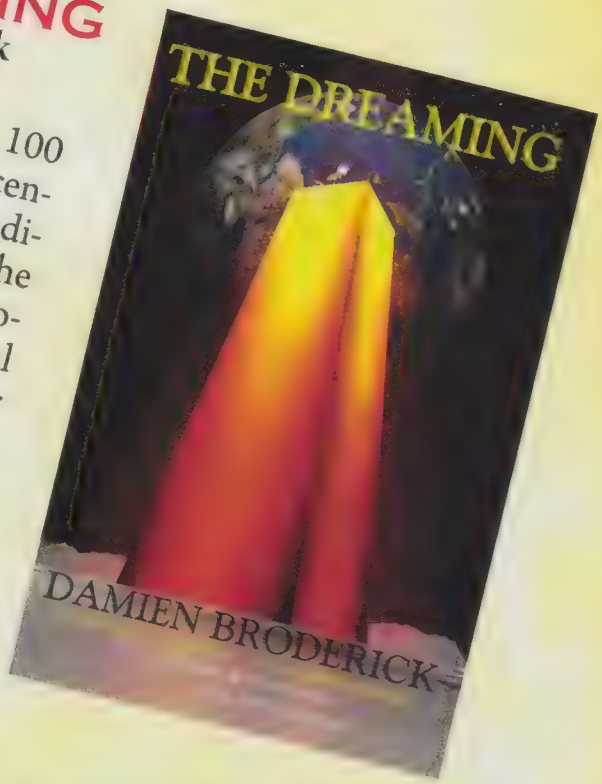

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It can be hard to make a name for yourself in a rigid society but with faith and elephants, all things are possible.

THE FORTUITOUS MEETING OF GERARD VAN OOST AND OLUDARA

by Christopher Kastensmidt
Illustration by Federico Piatti

High atop the Church of the Immaculate Conception, in contrast to the subdued hues of the building's unpainted mortar and stone, a scarlet macaw perched upon a wooden cross. The macaw cocked its head from side to side, watching people move through Salvador's principal plaza. After a few minutes, it paused to stretch its wings, presenting its full array of colors—scarlet, gold, sapphire, chalk, amber, and coal—a combination found nowhere else in nature.

The flash of color caught Gerard's eye. He looked up and examined the macaw. The exotic bird symbolized everything which had brought him to this strange New World: beauty, mystery, and magic. All thoughts of returning to Europe faded before the bird's gorgeous display. Certainly that one sight alone, unknown to most European eyes, was in itself worth braving the six-week journey across the Atlantic.

When the bird took flight, disappearing beyond the city's northern wall, Gerard returned his focus to the plaza. Out of habit, he tugged the bottom of his linen doublet, fitting it snugly around his broad chest. Then he stroked his palm-length goatee with his right hand and tapped the pommel of his Bolognese rapier with his left as he considered the problem at hand.

He had come to Brazil under the assumption that anyone courageous enough to make the trip could earn a spot in one of the adventuring troops, but unfortunately that had not been the case. Antonio Dias Caldas, the most renowned adventurer in the province, had firmly declined Gerard's services. And so far, no other group had stepped forward to explore the local wilds. Gerard could potentially raise his own standard, but he would need a strong team, and he hadn't met anyone in Salvador with whom he would trust his life.

His thoughts were interrupted as the Portuguese merchant Pero de Belem walked by, leading a coffle of African slaves. Pero tipped his wide-brimmed hat as he passed and Gerard responded in kind. The slaves followed one by one, heads held low, the chains joining their neck collars swaying between them. Their only clothing consisted of one-piece cotton tunics which hung to their knees.

The line came to an abrupt halt when one of the local mill owners stopped Pero to have a word with him. Gerard noticed that the nearest slave did not bend like the others; he stood completely erect. Already a few inches taller than average, his posture made him tower above the rest. His bulging muscles stood out, even through the unfitted tunic. The man exuded power and grace, and his eyes held a certain deepness. His wide nostrils and high cheekbones only heightened the effect. Gerard could only think of one word to describe the man: magnificent. He lamented the fact that men were taken from their homelands in chains.

Gerard grimaced as the depressing sight cast a shadow over the idyllic image he had formed just moments before.

"And so, even in paradise there are slaves," he said.

The slave turned toward him but did not make a sound. Gerard looked away, embarrassed, wondering if the man might have understood his remark.

Trumpets sounded from the North Gate, drawing away his

attention. Shouts erupted from all around the plaza as Antonio Dias Caldas strode through the gate, with a native carrying his gold-and-red standard close by his side. Behind him followed his band. Gerard counted forty in all, many less than had started the mission a few weeks before.

Without breaking stride, Antonio crossed the plaza to the Governor's Palace. The rest of his men dispersed in the square, each one quickly surrounded by curious bystanders.

Diogo, one of Antonio's men whom Gerard held in high esteem, passed nearby.

"Diogo," asked Gerard, "what happened?"

"We killed the Boitatá!"

"The serpent that's been attacking the farmers? Tell me more! We've heard only rumors here."

"It was truly a marvelous creature. During the day it hid in lakes and rivers, so we had to hunt it at night. It took days to corner it, but when we finally did we discovered a serpent large beyond belief—as wide as a cart and long as a main mast, I swear. Its body blazed with a magical blue flame which burned beast but not bush, and which no water could douse. The flame made the beast appear blue, but when we cast light upon it, its scales shone with all the colors of the rainbow.

"Its eyes were giant balls of fire," Diogo continued, "each the size of a skull. Two of our companions, Afonso and Paulo, made the mistake of looking the beast in the eye; both of them went mad. The Boitatá burned and struck as we fought it, killing everything it touched. But that is all I can tell for now. Antonio will want to tell the details of the victory himself, after he collects the governor's reward."

"And the recognition." Gerard practically sighed as he said it. Then he asked, "It appears you lost some men?"

"Yes, we lost ten during our encounter with the beast."

"Then I suppose you'll be looking to fill your ranks?"

Diogo frowned without responding.

"Diogo," Gerard continued, "you know I want to serve under a standard more than anything. I didn't spend six weeks cramped in a caravel just to visit a mortar-and-bamboo village. I came here for adventure! I have the strength of a bear, and I'm one of the best harquebus shots you'll ever meet. I know Antonio respects you, please help me."

"I don't know if there's anything I can do, Gerard. We still have twenty harquebusiers, more than enough for anything left roaming these parts. But your biggest problem is that Antonio isn't fond of Protestants."

"I'm not going to convert to Catholicism just to join your band."

"And it wouldn't help," came a voice to his right, "I'm not fond of converts, either."

Gerard turned to see Antonio approaching, his chest jutting forward under his rich, blue doublet and his black beard cropped close around his long chin.

"Go back to Europe, Gerard," said Antonio, "you're not wanted here. I formally requested that Governor Almeida have you arrested for vagrancy if you're not on the next ship out. Given his delight at my defeat of the Boitatá, I have every expectation my request will be granted."

"I didn't know vagrancy was a crime in Brazil," Gerard replied through clenched teeth.

"It is if the governor says so."

Gerard breathed deeply before responding. "I'm willing to risk my life in your service and you treat me this way?"

"I don't need your help, Gerard." Then he paused. "Although there could be a way. A man who can think on his feet is worth a dozen harquebusiers. Brazil is filled with all types of wily creatures, and many times a sharp wit is more useful than a sharp sword. If you can guess how we defeated the Boitatá, I'll withdraw my request for your arrest and consider a place for you in my band."

Gerard pulled on his goatee. Quick decisions were not his specialty, and being forced to make one muddled his thoughts. He wiped the sweat from his forehead.

"Time's up," said Antonio, "any ideas?"

Gerard had no idea how much time had passed. He'd worried the entire time, never managing to concentrate on the problem. "Hmmm," he said, "I don't know."

"A serpent is best defeated through its stomach."

All three men turned to see who had spoken. The African-accented Portuguese made the speaker undeniable; the voice had come from the nearby slave.

"How did you know that?" shouted Antonio. "I told the story to Governor Almeida just five minutes ago!"

Pero de Belem came running. "What's going on here?" he yelled. "Is this slave babbling something?" He held his face close to the slave's and said, "Ooga Booga!"

"Actually," said Gerard, "he appears to speak perfect Portuguese."

"Oh right," Pero said, scratching his beard, "that one. I can never tell them apart. He's the only one of these monkeys who speaks Portuguese, and he gave me a mouthful too much of it on the way over from Africa."

"Do not call us monkeys," said the slave. "We are not animals. You who take men from their homelands and sell them like vegetables are the animals. But I comprehend your denial, Mr. Pero de Belem, and I pity you. If you ever truly accept what it is you do, it will haunt you for the rest of your life."

"See what I mean?" Pero said, holding up his hands. He turned his attention back to the slave. "No one asked for your opinion, and one more word out of you will get you a lashing tonight."

"That won't be necessary," interrupted Gerard, not wanting to see any harm come to the man. "He just responded to a question. He appears to be quite a remarkable man."

"Really?" said Pero, squinting his eyes. "Well, if you think he's so wonderful, I can sell him to you. He's supposed to be shipped down to Fernando Alvaro's sugar mill in Rio de Janeiro on Thursday, but if you give me forty thousand réis before then, I can settle something else with Fernando."

"Forty thousand? That price is absurd!"

"What was that you called him again, 'remarkable'? Well, that just means you have to pay a 'remarkable' price! And don't think Fernando is going to give him up once he lays his hands on him, either. Five of his slaves were killed in Indian attacks last month, and he's eager to fill the ranks with fresh fodder." Pero turned back to the line and yelled, "Move out!"

Antonio burst out laughing.

"See, Gerard?" he said. "You're not clever enough for an expedition like ours. Even a slave just arrived from Africa knows more than you!"

He walked off chuckling.

Diogo placed a hand on Gerard's shoulder. "I'm sorry, Gerard. Antonio's words are often unnecessarily brusque."

Gerard watched the line of slaves moving away.

"Not at all," he replied, "I think he may be right."

Gerard sat patiently in Pero's office with a spoon, a glass of water, and a full plate of food on the table before him. To pass the time, he studied a painting of Belem, Pero's native city. He recognized the port from its unmistakable ornamented tower; he had passed it on the start of his voyage to Brazil. The quality of the painting did not match those he had seen in Italy and Flanders, yet still provided a reasonable representation of the port.

Pero entered with the slave in tow. The slave stared at Gerard in silence, then took a long look at the plate on the table.

"Please, sit down," offered Gerard.

The slave sat down on the other side of the table.

"Could you please leave us alone?" asked Gerard, looking at Pero.

"I suppose it can't do any harm. But if anything happens to the property," he said, motioning toward the slave with a flick of his chin, "you're responsible." Right before walking out the door he looked back and said, "Remember, forty thousand by Thursday or he's on his way to Rio."

Once Pero slammed the door, Gerard looked over to the slave and asked, "What's your name?"

The slave studied him before responding. Their eyes made contact and Gerard held his gaze without blinking.

The slave said, "Tell me yours first."

"All right, my name is Gerard van Oost, twenty-nine years of age. I'm Dutch, from the county of Flanders, but I've spent so much time traveling Europe that I haven't set foot in my homeland in years."

"Well, Gerard, you are the only white man who has ever asked me my name. I am Oludara. I hail from the kingdom of Ketu, which bears the misfortune of being located in a region you Europeans call the Slave Coast. By your calendar, I have lived for twenty-five years."

After a pause, he continued. "Why do you seek me? From what I heard of your conversation in the plaza, I understood that you are not a sugar mill owner."

"First, I'd like to offer you a gift." Gerard pushed the plate and spoon forward. "Are you familiar with the local food?"

"Only the black beans and rice, which we receive only when we are lucky. Most days we eat cooked green bananas, which makes me think Mr. Pero de Belem really does believe we are monkeys."

Gerard didn't know whether the comment was said in bitterness or jest. After a short pause, he chanced a chuckle. Then Oludara smiled and they both laughed heartily.

"Yes, Gerard, even in a situation like mine a man must keep his humor. My people say, 'Do not lament spilled water. As long as the calabash is not broken, one can still get more.' Times are dark for me, but my body and will are strong, and for this reason I do not despair. However, it is indeed difficult to live on bananas alone."

"Well, you may find this to your liking." Gerard pointed to each item in turn. "The fish is grouper. It is denser than most other fish and mild on the tongue. This is roasted aipim. It comes from the ground like a potato, but is richer in flavor. The yellow bread is made from corn, and mixed with a bit of coconut for sweetness. And these slices are from a fruit known as pineapple, regarded as one of the sweetest flavors in the world. It is so treasured by the Portuguese, they ship trees all the way to India to make sure the fruit is never far from their colonies."

Oludara stared at the plate, but didn't make any move toward it.

"It is truly a feast, but no one offers a meal for free. Let me know what you seek before I accept your generosity."

"Tell me how you knew the answer to Antonio's question yesterday."

"Is that all? I would tell you the story if only for the courtesy you have shown. But I accept your offering, as I am so tired of bananas that my pride would not get in the way of any handout."

Oludara ate his first spoonful of rice and beans, closing his eyes as he chewed it. After washing it down with a sip of water, he looked Gerard in the eye.

"Let me tell you a story. It happened five years ago, in my homeland of Ketu…"

Between bites, he told his tale.

Oludara stopped clearing weeds and leaned against the hoe. The wrapper around his waist weighed heavy from the sweat which trickled down his bare chest. He could afford to rest; three weeks remained before yam planting, and the field appeared to be in good shape. He watched his two younger brothers working farther up field.

As he removed his straw hat to wipe sweat from his brow, he noticed movement to his left. Bale Akeju, master of the village, approached with another man. As they came closer, he saw that both wore fine indigo robes. Wearing such a rich robe was normal for a bale, but not for anyone else he knew in the region. Oludara could not imagine what matter would make the bale come out to his field. It would be much easier to find him in his hut that evening, after the day's work.

They came straight to him, without stopping, and he greeted both with a handshake. The stranger studied him carefully, but it was the bale who spoke.

"Oludara, this man has come all the way from Ketu to speak with you."

"Are you Oludara," asked the man, "the son of one known as the 'Slayer of Monsters'?"

"I am Oludara, but my father passed away years ago."

"That fact is known to the oba, for it was he himself who sent me with orders to escort you to Ketu. He wishes to have words with you. I am Oyewole, one of his personal messengers."

Bale Akeju gasped at the news.

Oludara frowned. "For one such as I to be called before the oba without warning cannot be good."

"You may be right," said Oyewole. "I know not why he has sent for you, but from my experience, a surprise summons from the oba is rarely good news—I would not trade places with you right now. Nevertheless, we must leave immediately; the oba does not like to be left waiting. Take time only to say goodbye to your family and collect clothes for your audience."

"Very well, it shall be done."

Even though Ketu was only a two-day walk, it might as well have been on the other side of the world for Oludara. He had only been to Ketu once before, as a child, when his father still lived. He had gone for one of the great festivals, and had seen the oba in full royal attire. He did not remember many details, just the feeling of awe he had experienced upon visiting.

The journey was well spent, as Oyewole told him much of the politics and history of Ketu. Oludara liked the man and imagined they could have been friends if Oyewole did not hold a rank in society so far above his.

As they neared the city, they passed through a multitude of farms. They then navigated the complex system of bulwarks and moats, the innermost courtyards surrounded by walls twice the height of a man.

The locals used different colors and fashions than those in Oludara's village. Massive squares full of wooden stands sat empty, waiting to be filled by crowds and merchandise on market day.

Oyewole led him to a guesthouse and asked him to prepare himself for his audience with the oba. A young woman helped him draw a bath and he washed off the red dust accumulated during the trip.

For his meeting with the oba, he vested a short-sleeved robe and tied it around the waist with a sash. A close-fitting cap completed the ensemble. It was not elegant, but the best that could be expected from a poor farming family.

Oyewole escorted him to the palace. The sight of the grandiose building—a towering clay construction—awed him. Two massive gates stood open in front. The guards, upon seeing Oyewole, motioned them through.

Warriors guarded the hall inside and out. Most held swords or bows, but some were equipped with Portuguese crossbows. Oludara had heard of them, but had never seen one before.

As he walked the long hall, he glanced at the bronze heads on each side: representations of all past obas of Ketu. These were interspersed among fine ivory carvings.

When he reached the end, he saw the oba's council: seven chiefs sitting to one side on lion-skin mats. At the end of the hall stood several eunuchs, the personal servants of the oba, identifiable by the way they wore their robes bunched upon their shoulders. Drummers and other attendants waited at other locations around the hall.

Oyewole shook Oludara's hand goodbye and motioned to a leopard-skin mat, where Oludara knelt to wait.

Two eunuchs carried a wooden stool to the front of the hall. Oludara could see elaborate carvings covering the stool, but could not make out the details from his vantage point.

Shortly after, one of the attendants shouted, "The great Oba Ademola enters!" A trumpet blast and drums accented his announcement.

The oba entered, flanked by two guards bearing halberds topped with thick bronze blades. Oludara soaked in as much detail as possible in the few seconds that ceremony allowed.

The oba wore a coral collar and silk sash upon his chest. A crown of red beads came to a point above his head, and lines of beads cascaded down from it. Rings around his neck reached up to his mouth and, combined with the beads, left little of his face exposed.

As the oba approached the wooden stool, Oludara and all others in the hall prostrated themselves. After a few moments, they returned to the kneeling position. Oludara kept his eyes pointed down in reverence, but longed to stare at the regality of his lord.

"You have been summoned because my diviners consulted the Ifa oracle." Oba Ademola spoke in an even voice, just loud enough for Oludara to hear every word clearly. "They told me to seek the progeny of a man who aided me long ago."

Oludara felt honored to hear the voice of the oba; it was a rare privilege. In public, the oba whispered through a cow tail whisk and a eunuch called out his words to the people.

"Your father helped me once when I was young," continued the oba. "With his cunning he killed Souyuu, a terrible beast which ravaged the local villages. Now, I face a similar problem, so I assume that you are the one I seek.

"Six months ago," he continued, "a dragon stopped one of my sons on the road and demanded that a sacrifice, taken from among my vassals, be tied and left at the sacred grove at Ofru every full moon. When my son told me the news, I refused. When the sacrifice was not sent, the dragon went to an outlying farm and killed an entire family. The next full moon, I sent fifty warriors to slay the beast. Only a few survived, and they reported that not even the bolts of the Portuguese crossbow could penetrate the beast's scales. Since then, I have sacrificed one of my vassals each month to this creature. I would not continue doing so."

After a pause, the oba spoke again. "I fear the beast cannot be beaten by force alone; cunning also is required. I hear you have faced many trials, even at your young age. You battled our enemies from Dauma, and I hear that at the age of sixteen you tricked and slew the very beast which killed your father."

The reminder sent a pang through Oludara, but he pushed it down.

"I regret sending such a fine man," continued the oba, "so recently turned to adulthood, on such a terrible task. However, an oba does not question, he does not ask, he orders. Thus, I order you to do everything in your power to slay the beast. Do you understand?"

"Yes," responded Oludara, "it will be an honor to serve the great Oba Ademola."

"Very good. I am gladdened to see you here before me. You remind me of your father in both manner and build. I do not know if you came to know the depth of his wisdom. When he slew Souyuu, I offered him anything in my power as a reward. He could have chosen riches or land or anything else which could have brought him temporal pleasure in this world, but he was too wise for that. Instead, he asked me to choose a name for his newborn son." At this, the oba laughed heartily. "He knew the gift would cost me not the price of a yam, but that an oba surely

He carried that dagger because your name was not the only present I gave him. I could not leave such wisdom unrewarded, so I also gave him that dagger, one of the greatest treasures in all of Ketu.

would choose a princely name. And thus I did. I chose the name Oludara for his son, and brought great honor to his family for all generations to come. I have no doubt he will stand by your side in the trial which awaits you."

After a pause, the oba asked, "Do you remember the dagger your father wore?"

"Yes."

"He carried that dagger because your name was not the only present I gave him. I could not leave such wisdom unrewarded, so I also gave him that dagger, one of the greatest treasures in all of Ketu. Since all ivory belongs to the oba, your village elders rightfully returned it to me upon his death. However, the chiefs agree—" he held a hand toward the seven counselors for emphasis, and they nodded in response— "that it would make a fine present for you now, to help with what you must face."

The oba motioned with a wave, and a eunuch carrying a fine bronze tray appeared from behind him. The eunuch knelt before Oludara, holding out the tray and presenting the dagger which lay upon it.

The dagger was exactly as Oludara remembered it: fine ivory tinted red from palm oil. The hilt contained intricate carvings; the side with a lightning bolt rested on top. The sight flooded him with memories of his father, but he shook them off and reached down to accept the gift, not wanting to appear unappreciative.

As Oludara touched the hilt, a strange sensation passed through his arm, causing him to jerk in surprise.

The oba saw his reaction and said, "The enchantment on that dagger is strong; it is rumored to come from Shango himself. Whether or not that is true not even I can say, but guard it well, because you will never again find its equal."

Oludara grasped the hilt firmly and lifted the dagger. The eunuch with the tray walked away.

"The Iya Kere controls my treasury," said the oba. "She will see to it that you have whatever equipment you need."

"Great Oba," said Oludara, "I must first see the beast if I am to try and defeat it."

"Of course. However, no one knows where it lives. You must go to Ofru on the next full moon, two days hence, and witness the sacrifice. Hide yourself as possible, for the beast is treacherous. May Olorun protect you."

The oba rose and everyone prostrated again.

Before the oba even left the hall, Oludara's mind swirled with thoughts of the task before him.

Oludara, his body camouflaged by red clay dust, lay behind one of the bushes in the sacred grove of Ofru. Some sixty paces before him lay the sacrifice, tied and gagged. He regretted he would not be able to save the man, but knew it would be foolish to face the beast without watching the sacrifice. His only concern was concealment. If the dragon caught a whiff of his scent, it would mean a quick end to his adventure.

When the moon reached its zenith, the dragon appeared. It resembled a massive green snake, except for some tiny, apparently useless wings and several stubby pairs of legs, which it used to propel itself in a half-walking, half-slithering fashion. The scales appeared impenetrable, like painted iron plates stacked upon each other.

The sacrificial victim, eyes wide, thrashed in his bonds and grunted muted screams through the gag. The dragon ignored him at first, flicking its tongue repeatedly to test the air around it. Completing its examination, it turned its full attention to the man. The moment they made eye contact the man stiffened.

Without ceremony, the dragon approached its victim, unhooked its jaw, and clasped down over his head. With the eye contact broken, the man resumed his thrashing, all the while slowly disappearing into the dragon's gullet. His movement stopped after a minute, when either his head was finally crushed or he ran out of air—Oludara could not tell which.

"Olorun save us!" whispered Oludara under his breath.

Shortly after finishing its meal, the dragon looked around, flicked its tongue a few more times, and turned back in the direction from which it had come.

Oludara waited half an hour, then crawled to the middle of the grove and found the tracks made by the dragon's slithering. Using the stealth he had acquired while hunting the savannah with his brothers, he trailed the beast.

He crawled for at least two hours before discovering the bedded dragon. It had coiled itself up near a tree. In the moonlight, Oludara could see a glint where one of the beast's eyes remained open.

As he crawled away from the dragon, Oludara formed his plan.

Two days later, Oludara found himself kneeling once again before the Oba Ademola.

"The Iya Kere informs me that for some reason you require an elephant in order to slay the beast," began the oba. "I have but one, and he has been with me for many years. I am loath to part with him, but I told you I would give you anything in my power, so it shall be done. However, the Iya Kere also informs me that there is something else you require which could only be discussed in my presence. I am curious to hear this request."

Brazil is a land for the taking. Precious stones, magic, and adventure without limit are spread throughout this giant, unexplored territory.

"It is indeed something only you can provide, my lord," replied Oludara. "I need you and the village chiefs to impart a nobleman's status upon the elephant."

A commotion rose among the counselors.

"Outrageous!" shouted the oba. "Our ancestors will laugh at such folly."

"However," replied Oludara, "I must ask it. As it is said, 'a thief is more merciful than a fire,' and we must choose the lesser of these evils. In this case, one noble elephant can do what a thousand men cannot. I do not think our ancestors will mock us if we succeed in our task. If you will but let me explain, it will all become clear."

Oludara sat in silence as the dragon entered the grove and gave a puzzled look at the bound elephant. It scanned around and caught sight of him. Oludara's stomach clenched as their eyes met; the dragon's gaze seemed to bore into him.

The dragon slithered to within a few paces of him, never breaking eye contact. Its forked tongue flicked out, almost touching him. Oludara tried to hold himself calmly, but knew that his muscles would not respond even if he wanted.

The dragon spoke in a hissing voice, "Are you the oba's sacrifice?"

Oludara struggled to begin his speech, but surprised himself when the words came out confidently. "No, I am but a messenger. As you are such a marvelous being, Oba Ademola has decided to give you the most magnificent member of his realm. The elephant is a noble within the oba's court, and should provide you with quite a meal."

"What trickery is this?"

"Have you not agreed to eat but one vassal each month, of the oba's choosing?"

"No man may lie when he looks into my eyes; what you say must be true." The dragon paused, as if thinking. "But in one thing you err. I demanded one vassal per month, but I never promised to eat but one. When I'm done with this wretched elephant, I'll eat both you and your oba as well, just for good measure."

The dragon turned, allowing Oludara the opportunity to take a deep breath.

The dragon wrapped itself around the elephant's neck. The elephant fought mightily, throwing its weight from side to side. The dragon appeared to suffer during the struggle, but eventually managed to strangle the tied animal.

After a short rest, it unhinged its jaw and fit its mouth around the elephant. It began with the hind legs, which Oludara assumed was to avoid swallowing the tusks point-first. Its skin stretched to the limit as it crushed the elephant bit by bit. It required hours to ingest the entire animal, ending when the trunk receded into its bloated body.

When it finished, it slithered away heavily without even looking at Oludara. Oludara smiled as the dragon's boast of eating him remained unfulfilled, much as he expected.

Oludara waited a full hour before setting out after the dragon. He found it at only half the distance it had crawled the previous time. It lay spread out, too bloated to coil properly. Oludara looked at the face and saw both eyes closed.

All along the dragon's belly, where the elephant lay inside, the skin stretched out enough to separate the scales, exposing the flesh beneath. Oludara found the part which contained the tusks. Using the tusks as a brace beneath the skin, he made an incision with his ivory knife. The dragon could do nothing more than shudder as he opened it.

"So I gave the head to the oba and he allowed me to take the skin back to my village, where we made many useful articles from it. And that is the end of my tale."

Gerard sat quietly, digesting all he had heard.

It was Oludara who finally broke the silence, after sipping the last bit of water. "So Antonio's group must have done something similar?"

"It appears they found a giant tapir, probably the closest thing to your elephant available in these parts, and tied it to a tree as bait. But even with their ruse it still took fifty men and over a hundred rounds of harquebus fire to bring down the beast. I'd say your kill was much more elegant."

Oludara smiled at the compliment.

Gerard leaned forward. "I have a proposition for you. Brazil is a land for the taking. Precious stones, magic, and adventure without limit are spread throughout this giant, unexplored territory. There would be hundreds arriving daily if not for the monsters which inhabit the wilds. Fame and fortune await those brave enough to face them—and quick enough to find them first."

"Yes," agreed Oludara, "both here and in Africa, two places the white man has not yet overrun with his civilizations, the ancient magics still live strong."

Gerard continued. "I discovered Brazil through the writings of Hans Staden and André Thevet, European explorers who published their adventures back home. The chance for adventure enthralled me, and I sold everything to make my way here. This is a chance to live like the ancient heroes of Greece, battling monsters and magic. Europe has forgotten those times. The nations are constantly at war, killing each other at the whims of monarchs, switching alliances like most men switch clothes.

Here there is real adventure!"

"So why do you come to me?"

"Because Antonio won't allow me to serve under his standard. Worse, he's accused me of vagrancy, and I could be arrested at any moment. But I refuse to quit. I want to form my own band and explore the Brazilian wilderness. To do that, I need your help. I need someone clever, fast on their feet. I'm not a stupid man, I'm educated, but I'm just not shrewd enough. Like yesterday, Pero doubled your price on the spot. A clever man would have tricked him into getting you for half, don't you think?"

"Yes, a clever man would have pointed out my insolence as a defect, not a strength; made me look like a troublemaker and made him want to pass me off on an outlander like yourself instead of risking problems with an important client."

"See, that's it," said Gerard. "Defeating monsters requires guile, and if what you say is true, you've probably got more experience than anyone here. I need your cunning, and it looks like you can hold your own in battle as well."

"It is true," replied Oludara. "I have fought both men and monsters, and still I live."

"So, if I free you, will you go with me?"

"You would go with two where other men walk in fear with fifty?"

"Well, yes, if those two are us!"

Oludara laughed deeply. "Yes, it is good I have a sense of humor, because you are a funny man. As I said before, I keep my spirits up and never lose hope, and I don't believe anything happens by chance. Our meeting in the plaza appears to have been particularly fortuitous, and I don't doubt the gods had something to do with it. Perhaps they even placed me into the slaver's hands so I could live out some purpose here on the other side of the world.

"However," he continued, "I have no desire to spend the rest of my life in the Brazilian wilderness. I must return to my people by the time I reach thirty years of age and start a family, for a man without children lives a sad life in the afterworld. If you agree to release me from service in five years time—and see me safely back to Africa—I will accompany you."

"Agreed. Now to the details. I have but one sword, but I do have a spare gun you can use."

"I won't use it. The long bows the natives carry suit me better; they are more accurate than the Portuguese harquebuses. I will acquire one shortly after we begin. However, I do ask that you trade the gun for an ivory knife which is in possession of Martim, one of Pero's crew. You will recognize it by the carving of lightning on one side and an axe on the other. You should also see what medicinal herbs you can obtain here in Salvador. Afterward, we can get more from the natives."

"All right," said Gerard. "Now what about the others?"

"Which others?"

"The other slaves from Africa."

"They are not my tribe, not my concern."

"You were the only one taken?"

"Yes."

"How?"

"I alone held off thirty rival warriors armed with harquebuses for three days so that my people could escape. They came raiding for slaves to sell to the Portuguese. That is how I know of the inaccuracy of the harquebuses."

"Once you travel with me, you'll see that a harquebus can be quite accurate in the proper hands. But how did you hold them off for so long?"

"Traps, misdirection. If we travel together, you will see that I have many tricks at my disposal."

"There's just one problem," said Gerard. "Thanks to my indiscretion yesterday, Pero is asking forty thousand réis for you, almost double the price of most slaves. I don't have nearly that much money."

"Saci-Pererê."

"What?"

"In a dream last night, a voice whispered that I could only be freed by Saci-Pererê. I can say no more."

Gerard walked the steps down to the docks. He had roamed the entire town—which didn't take long—and was running out of people to ask about Saci-Pererê. Not a single person recognized the name.

He found a group of sailors resting under a tree. An Indian stood nearby, back toward the group, looking up curiously at a ship. Like all natives, he was naked except for intricate designs painted on his body in black dye.

"Excuse me," Gerard asked of the group, "but do any of you men know a Saci-Pererê?"

The sailors grunted and shook their heads. Gerard scanned the docks for others.

"I can tell you about Saci-Pererê."

Gerard turned and jumped in surprise at hearing Spanish-accented Portuguese coming from the Indian. Upon closer inspection, he saw that the man's features were not Indian, but European: around sixty years old, but with skin tanned dark by the sun.

"Pardon my surprise, I thought you were an Indian come to trade in the city."

"Many make that mistake."

"I am Gerard van Oost." Gerard held out a hand.

The unusual man shook his hand firmly. "I am called Piraju, but long ago I was known as Miguel."

"How did you come to be dressed like a native?"

"You have heard of the legendary Caramuru?"

"The shipwrecked Portuguese who became an Indian chief?"

"Exactly. His story and mine are intertwined. I was a sailor on the Spanish carrack *Madre de Dios,* which shipwrecked here in the Bay of All Saints in 1535. Most who survived the wreck were killed by the Indians, but some twenty of us were taken prisoner, to be used in one of their cannibalistic feasts. Just as they prepared to cook us, Caramuru arrived and convinced them to set us free. Most of my shipmates eventually returned to Spain, but Caramuru's daughters and the Indian princess Paraguacu were the most beautiful women I had ever laid eyes on, so I convinced one of them to marry me and I joined the tribe."

"Amazing. So you never returned to Europe?"

"No," replied Piraju, looking at one of the caravels docked in the bay, "but it looks like Europe is coming here. Now, weren't

you asking about Saci-Pererê?"

"Yes, I need to find him."

Piraju laughed. "*Find* Saci-Pererê? Intelligent people try to avoid him! And even if you do want to meet him, you don't find Saci, he finds you!"

"But you see I'm in a bit of a hurry. I only have three days in which to find him."

"Be careful. Dom Sebastian of Portugal may be king of these settled lands, but Saci and his cousin Curupira are the lords of the Brazilian wilderness beyond the coast. They protect the forest and don't take kindly to strangers."

"But a friend of mine heard in a dream that I must find him."

"A dream?" Piraju studied him. "Yes, in that case, you must seek him out. Visions cannot be ignored."

"So how will I know him?"

"His appearance is that of a young black boy with a pointy red cap, but his most distinguishing feature is that he has but one leg. Don't be fooled though: it's not a handicap. He can hop faster on that leg than most men can run."

"And how will I find him?"

"Like I said, you don't find him, he finds you. But he does have a penchant for tobacco. You might attract him if you can find some high-quality herb."

"Tobacco? All right, I'll try it."

"But beware, he is mischievous. If little things go wrong, it is because Saci is near."

"And how might I obtain a favor?"

"Saci does favors for no one. His only favor is allowing you to travel the forest unharmed. Although it is rumored his power lies in his red hat. That might be the key."

"Thank you, sir," replied Gerard, forgetting Piraju's Indian name. "I must be off immediately. I hope our paths meet again."

"If Saci allows it, I'm sure they will."

Gerard, a heavy pack on his back, was just a few hundred yards beyond the North Gate when he heard a horse galloping behind him. He turned to see Antonio riding up.

"Gerard, what luck!" called Antonio. "I was hoping to tell you the news myself."

"What news?"

"The governor has accepted my request to try you for vagrancy. It appears you spent the last of your coin on tobacco and don't have enough left for the passage home."

"Word travels fast in Salvador."

"Even faster when such news is propitious. I myself advised Governor Almeida of your predicament!" Antonio laughed. "Vices can so easily push a weak man over the edge, such a pity. With the evidence at hand, a conviction is assured. If you're still in Brazil by noon Thursday, you must present yourself before the governor."

"The same day Oludara goes to Rio," said Gerard under his breath.

"What was that?" asked Antonio, squinting.

"None of your concern. Is that all you have to tell me? I have some important business to conduct outside the city, and your prating is causing me delay."

Antonio glared down at him. "If you're leaving Salvador, Gerard, I suggest you don't return."

Antonio turned his horse and headed back to town. Gerard continued down the forest path.

Gerard sat and leaned against a fallen tree. He pulled out his pipe and tobacco pouch for the twentieth time that day. He had roamed far into the forest, stopping randomly to smoke. Just looking at tobacco was starting to make him ill. His only consolation was that traveling in the woods allowed him to leave his formal clothes back in the city and wear a cotton shirt and breeches more suited to the tropical climate.

Vices can so easily push a weak man over the edge, such a pity. With the evidence at hand, a conviction is assured. If you're still in Brazil by noon Thursday, you must present yourself before the governor.

He fumbled at the knot on the pouch for almost a minute, unable to open it.

"I don't remember tying the pouch that way," he said to himself.

He shrugged and reached into a pocket for his knife. He felt around, unable to find it. After searching for several minutes, he finally discovered it deep within his pack.

"I don't remember putting that there."

He removed the knife from the sheath and began cutting the knot. The knife passed harmlessly over the cord. Upon closer inspection, he noticed that the knife's blade was completely dull.

"I just sharpened this today!"

Then came the realization.

"Saci-Pererê!" he shouted.

"You are correct," came a high-pitched voice from beside him, "but I don't like being called by my entire name, it's much too formal. Just call me Saci."

Gerard spun to see an individual exactly as Piraju had described: a young black boy with one leg and a red cap. He also wore short red leggings, but his chest was uncovered and hairless. His musculature was undeveloped, like that of a prepubescent boy. When he smiled, it reminded Gerard of a guilty child feigning innocence.

Saci hopped to the log and dropped down beside Gerard.

"That smells like a good smoke. You wouldn't happen to have a bit for me there, would you?"

"If you can untie the knot," Gerard held out the pouch, "you can take as much as you like. I have plenty more."

Saci grabbed the pouch and untied the knot so quickly that Gerard couldn't follow the movement of his fingers. He then lifted his red hat, shook it three times, and a wooden pipe fell from it. Gerard noticed strange symbols carved into the pipe.

After filling the pipe, Saci took a puff and the tobacco lit instantly, without fire.

"Now that *is* a good smoke," he said, leaning back and blowing a few smoke rings. "So tell me why you've entered my forest."

"I came seeking you."

"Then you must want my permission to travel the wilderness. Most don't have the courtesy to ask, and they soon regret their lack of manners."

"I do indeed plan on adventuring the wild lands of Brazil."

"You seem like a nice gentleman, so I'll allow you to travel my forest, on the condition you always have a pouch of tobacco ready in case we should ever cross paths."

"Fair enough."

"And you must do as little damage to the forest as possible, using only what you need."

"Does that include the monsters?"

"You mean the magical beasts?" Saci shrugged. "Do with them what you wish—for they would do the same to you."

"That is good, because I plan to make a name for myself confronting the creatures of these lands. But, in truth, I have come here to ask something else of you."

"Sorry," said Saci, annoyance in his voice, "but I grant no other favors. I have offered to leave you be, and that is already much."

"I appreciate that, but I was told to visit you and request something that only you can give."

"Then whoever sent you is a fool."

Saci laughed at an even higher pitch than his speaking voice. Then he disappeared, leaving only a puff of smoke from his pipe to show he had ever been there.

A rustling sound came from Gerard's left and a boar burst from the bushes, charging him. He jumped and grabbed a nearby tree branch, scrambling up the trunk with his legs. The boar paused at the bottom of the tree and sniffed around. Gerard could hear a high-pitched laughing in the distance. He found a nook in which to sit and waited several minutes until the animal left.

Ever since his encounter with Saci the day before, such torments had become commonplace. A hole had mysteriously formed in his pack, forcing him to backtrack and find items which had fallen out. His water had been replaced by radish juice. And a few drops of honey hidden in his breeches had led to a nasty surprise from some ants. Also, every knot tied was soon untied, and vice-versa.

After climbing down from the tree he yelled out, "Saci-Pererê, stop tormenting me! I must speak with you."

Saci appeared several paces in front of him.

"Well then go ahead and speak."

"I need a favor which only you can provide."

"Tell you what, if you can catch me, I'll grant your wish."

"All right!"

Without thinking, Gerard ran forward. However, his first step brought him face-first with the ground.

With another high-pitched laugh, Saci vanished from sight.

Gerard looked down to find a rope binding his boots together with an incredibly complex knot.

"So, he likes knots, does he?" he said as he reached down to remove the boots.

It was Thursday, the day of reckoning for both him and Oludara, so Gerard prayed for one last appearance of Saci. If he did appear, Gerard knew he would have to make the most important shot of his life.

"No harder than shooting a fly off an apple at twenty paces," he joked to himself.

To relieve the cramping, he shifted his body within the blind he had built. Even with the harquebus resting on a support branch, it was difficult to spend so much time in a firing position.

Thirty feet before him lay a path, and upon that path lay the most complex knot he could ever have imagined. He had used eleven cords of varying sizes, and spent no less than four hours tying them together as intricately as possible.

Thirty feet before him lay a path, and upon that path lay the most complex knot he could ever have imagined. He had used eleven cords of varying sizes, and spent no less than four hours tying them together as intricately as possible. In the end, the knot had a diameter of three feet. Visions of Alexander and the Gordian knot flashed through Gerard's head, and he chuckled, thinking how primitive that ancient knot must have been compared to his masterpiece.

A movement caught his eye, and he held still. Saci came hopping along the path and stopped just before the massive knot. He bent down to examine it, then righted himself and looked around carefully. Gerard held his breath as Saci's gaze passed over him.

After several visual sweeps, Saci bent down and began untying the knot with blinding speed. Gerard knew he had only seconds to act. He held his breath and fired the harquebus. He waved his hand to clear the smoke and saw Saci frantically patting his bald head with both hands, searching for the cap which Gerard's perfect shot had sent flying.

Gerard loosed the rope beside him, which released a net hidden high in the canopy. He ran to the path and scooped up the red hat.

Saci lay sobbing beneath the net. "Please, free me, I will die in minutes without my hat. I did you no harm."

"I wouldn't say the prank with the ants was exactly harmless, but don't try to fool me, I know you're a trickster. You won't get your hat back until you grant my favor."

Saci stopped his pouting and sighed. "Very well, what is your wish?"

"My heart's greatest desire is one-hundred gold cruzados."

"Is that all? Most men would ask for an entire gold mine."

"I want to make my own way in this world, and create my own legend."

"Then why are you so concerned with one hundred cruzados?"

"I need to pay the price of a slave."

Saci turned away. "Then you might as well strike me down. I would never help a man acquire a slave." Saci's voice lowered, for the first time serious. "I was once a slave, a young boy on the first slave ship ever to arrive from Africa, until a treacherous death and magic turned me into what I am."

"You don't understand," replied Gerard, "I don't wish to buy *him,* I wish to buy his freedom. In return, he has agreed to aid me for five years. He will accompany me through the wilderness of Brazil, braving the mysteries there."

"Is what you say true?"

"Yes."

Saci paused. "In that case I will give you what you need, and allow both of you to travel my lands. But I'll keep an eye on you. If you don't hold your part of the bargain, I'll torment you for the rest of your life."

"I am a man of my word."

"All right, give me the hat."

"First," said Gerard, "make an oath."

"I swear I will give you your one hundred cruzados."

"Swear it on the forest."

"I swear upon my realm, the forest."

"Very well."

Gerard lifted a corner of the heavy net and Saci crawled out. Gerard tossed him the hat. Saci shook the hat four times and a golden nugget fell into his palm. He placed his hat back on and proceeded to rub the nugget between his hands. As he did so, golden coins appeared, clinking together as they fell to the ground.

After a large pile had formed, Saci shoved the nugget back under his hat and said, "That should cover the price. I would have given you a gold brick, but people might have thought you found it in the wilderness, and then I'd have more serious problems."

"Yes," agreed Gerard, "if gold is ever found in Brazil, I fear even you won't be able to hold back the invasion."

Saci blinked out of sight without warning. His voice came from the woods, "Don't forget, I'll be watching you!"

Gerard began picking up the coins.

Gerard, panting, burst into the governor's office. Governor Almeida sat behind an exquisite mahogany desk. He wore a black, flat cap with a puffy white feather and a burgundy shoulder cape clasped at the neck by a gold chain. Antonio, also formally dressed, leaned by the governor's side, apparently in the middle of some conversation.

The governor frowned and said, "Gerard van Oost, you're late."

"Sorry, Governor," he replied, "I came running with a sack of gold weighing me down."

"Gold?" replied the governor, raising an eyebrow.

Antonio squinted menacingly at Gerard.

"Yes," said Gerard, "one hundred cruzados. Gold enough to buy the freedom of a slave. His name is Oludara."

Antonio has charged you with vagrancy and practicing the Protestant religion. Protestantism isn't a crime under the laws of Brazil, and I can't see how a man of your means could be called a vagrant.

"What is this?" shouted Antonio. "Where did you acquire such a fortune?"

Governor Almeida raised a hand to quiet Antonio. "One hundred cruzados, did you say?" he asked. "That's forty thousand réis! Quite an extravagant price for a slave."

"I don't consider it right to put a price on any man," replied Gerard, "but by any measure, this one is extraordinary."

"I expect the usual tax will be paid on the sale?"

"Pero de Belem will pay the required amount."

Governor Almeida studied Gerard for a few moments before speaking. "Antonio has charged you with vagrancy and practicing the Protestant religion. Protestantism isn't a crime under the laws of Brazil, and I can't see how a man of your means could be called a vagrant. Thus, I am forced to dismiss the case."

"But, Governor—" started Antonio.

"I'm sorry, Antonio, but I must uphold the law."

"Governor," said Gerard, "if I may, I would like to ask a boon."

The Governor raised his eyebrows and leaned forward. "What is it?"

"I wish to form a troop under my own banner, to explore the wilderness at will."

Antonio choked back a sound.

"And who will serve under your standard?" asked the governor.

"Myself and Oludara. That is, if he chooses to accompany me."

"You mean just the two of you?"

"You're not the first person to ask me that question this week."

Governor Almeida held his sides and laughed. "Antonio," he said, "why are you spending so much effort to lock this man away when he's practically offering to kill himself? I can't arrest him, but I can do you one favor." He looked toward Gerard and said, "Gerard, your request is granted."

Antonio glowered silently.

"Now will that be all?" asked the governor. "I am busy preparing an expedition against the French raiders in Paraíba."

"Governor," said Gerard, "today I have gained all that my heart desires. I'll take no more of your time, as I also have an expedition to plan."

He bowed and left the office.

As Gerard passed through the main hall of the Governor's Palace, he heard quick footsteps behind him. He turned just as Antonio grabbed his shoulder.

"Play the hero as long as you can, Gerard," he said, "but the wilderness is *my* territory. Pray we don't cross paths."

"Even after all your treachery," replied Gerard, "I hold you no grudge. And there are greater dangers than you in the Brazilian wilderness."

"We'll see," replied Antonio. He turned his back and stomped from the hall.

Oludara, wearing a brand new cotton outfit Gerard had purchased for him, stepped through the door into Pero's office. Magnificent—the same word that came to mind the first time Gerard saw him—was the only way he could think to describe Oludara in his new clothes.

"So, do you like the clothes?"

"They are suitable. Although it might be more advantageous to travel naked, as the natives do."

Gerard, his Protestant mind jarred by the suggestion, couldn't help but blush. "I don't think we'll be doing that, the clothes will be fine."

He laid the ivory knife on the table. Oludara picked it up and passed his fingers slowly across the carvings. A single tear slid down his face.

"Very good," he said.

Gerard handed him a backpack. "The herbs are in there, along with the rest of our equipment. It appears that Saci even added a few of his own when I wasn't looking."

"Really? I thought Saci did favors for no man."

"It appears he has taken an interest in our adventure."

"That could be very good, or very bad."

"Most likely both," said Gerard. "But I still have one question for you: Do you go willingly on this dangerous journey?"

"You would still give me the option to refuse?" asked Oludara.

"I didn't pay to buy you," said Gerard, "I paid to free you. I would not face the dangers of Brazil with a man who does not go of his own free will."

Oludara smiled. "You have proven yourself quite a man this week, Gerard van Oost. Catching Saci shows you are more resourceful than you give yourself credit for. And you could have asked him for anything, but you chose to free me. I see you are serious about this venture, and very brave. I do not choose companions lightly, but I know that you will be a worthy one. I would serve you for five years to pay my debt, but since you would have it so, I go with you as a friend."

They smiled and shook hands.

"Then I suppose that makes it official," said Gerard, "now we're a team. Look at what I made."

He unfurled a linen standard. Upon it, sketched roughly in black dye, appeared an elephant and a macaw.

Gerard noticed Oludara cringe at the poor drawings and added, "It's just a rough idea for now; we can improve it later."

"I speak truthfully when I say that what you have there is the ugliest, yet at the same time the most wonderful standard I have ever seen."

"Then we are in full agreement," said Gerard, "and since we have our standard, I don't see any reason why we shouldn't leave immediately."

"Indeed, the dawn does not come twice to wake a man. Many adventures lie before us; let us not make them wait!"

High atop the Church of the Immaculate Conception, a scarlet macaw cocked its head and watched two men, one white and one black, as they crossed Salvador's central plaza and departed the city through the North Gate. ☙

Longing for the old days of discovery but lacking any new places to find, Christopher Kastensmidt decided to explore the frontiers of the global economy by working for a start-up in southern Brazil. Ten years and many adventures later, he is now Studio Coordinator for Ubisoft Porto Alegre. If you'd like to know more about the world of Gerard van Oost and Oludara and their adventures together, please visit the website: **http://eamb.org/**.

Fantastic Journeys: Q&A with

Silvano Braido's whimsical surreal paintings will make you smile.

by Karen Haber

With a visual erudition and richness of palette and texture, Silvano Braido creates a uniquely fantastic world of imagination comparable only to Hieronymus Bosch or Pieter Brueghel. I can return endlessly, joyfully, to the rich tapestry of his creativity and see something new and wonderful each time.

—Wayne Barlowe

Silvano Braido's whimsical surreal paintings will make you smile. They also might bring a tear to your eye, but that's all part of the artist's plan.

Despite his fantastic creatures and physics-defying landscapes, Braido's work summons very human reactions from the viewer, most often delighted amusement.

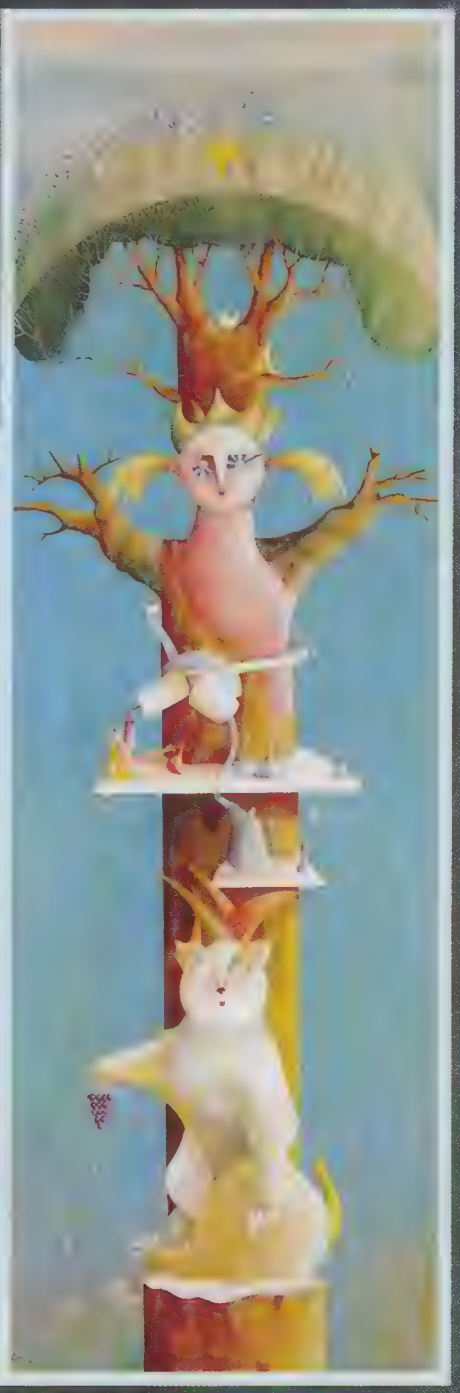
Creatures wander across bridged islands floating in bright, textured air. Dragons, walking fish, and celestial bodies, including stars and moons, are adapted by the artist to become residents in his imaginary skyscapes.

The effect is mysterious, sweet, and odd. Braido's choice of unusual canvas dimensions serves to emphasize the peculiarity of his vision.

Sometimes the narrative is obvious, as in *La Vacca Ostinata* (The Stubborn Cow), and sometimes it's just funny: *Isola Delle Gallines* (Island of the Chickens)

Italian Artist Silvano Braido

The artist seduces the viewer with a combination of whimsy and masterful color effects. He works in various media including oil and acrylic on canvas, tempera on paper—he achieves tremendous textural effects in this medium—and watercolor. Braido has become known for his Bestiary of droll, peculiar, and poignant creatures, and is at his most playful whether he's giving his own take on familiar animals like the giraffe or creating unique creatures from spare parts and his own imagination.



Texture and pentimenti add to the surreal quality of the skyscapes that the artist's creatures inhabit. Colors are worked in unexpected combinations, in high-contrast complimentary pairings. Color range shows his mastery, from fully saturated to delicate tints over darker underpainting. Exaggeration and stylization of figures gives a degree of distance/anonymity to the figures—a universal quality. In some cases, the unusual vertical dimension of his canvases emphasizes the angularity of the subject.

His unique use of contrast, complimentary hues, and texture are often key to setting the mood and emotional power of the painting. He might be labeled a colorist, but the subjects are obviously as important to this artist as is the color.

Born in Treviso, Italy, Silvano discovered a need to draw and express himself at a very early age. Pencil, pastels and alter, oil and acrylic became his constant companions. During studies at the Academy of Fine Arts in Venice he experimented with other media—including etching—and means of expression, but he found himself returning to painting as though it was his native turf. Although family concerns caused him to leave school, he never stopped his creative efforts

and painted during his spare time. With determination, self-discipline, and deep love for the work, he took the great leap and launched himself into a career as a full-time artist. His tragi-comic sensibility and inventive, capricious imagery have won him international acclaim and success. His work has been exhibited throughout Italy, including Bologna, Venice, and Rome; elsewhere in Europe including Austria, Germany, and Belgium; and in New York and Los Angeles.

Italian art critic L. Nicola Micieli sums it up nicely: "Rather than a menagerie in the style of ancient fantastic zoology, Braido's animals seem to me the facets of the prism that is human nature. They reflect the multiple aspects of the artist's personality [seen through] the sometimes idealized, sometimes distorted masks of the animals. [They] may equally be thought of as alter egos through which the artist ironically addresses his own idiosyncrasies and inhibitions, expresses his melancholy, exorcises his demons, and gives himself over to his impulses and feelings, from dreams to poetry and the range of sensations and emotions that fill his day."

Realms of Fantasy: Your website—http://www.braidosilvano.it/—is beautiful. Why is it entitled The Fantastic Journey (La Viaggia Fantastico)?

Silvano Braido: Because my work is a dream that travels along the roads of fantasy.

RoF: Do you consider yourself a fantasy artist? A surrealist?

SB: I consider myself a fantastic surrealist.

RoF: Why do we need and crave fantasy—both stories and images—in our lives?

SB: Because we are too often sad. I think that humans can suffer from infectious insanity. Therefore we have a need for something that makes us dream.

RoF: Are you telling stories in your paintings? For example, *La Regina Del Bosco, A Cena con la Luna,* or *Il Drago e la Luna?* Can you explain any of these?

SB: As an example, in *Il Drago e la Luna* (The Dragon and the Moon), the dragon represents our daily routine and breathless pace that prevents us from seeing the fantastic world, represented by the moon.

RoF: Which part of painting do you enjoy most, the idea or the physical act?

SB: It all appeals to me. I enjoy all of it.

RoF: How do you begin? With color? With imaginary beasts? Do you make preliminary sketches or paint studies? How long do you spend on a painting in order to finish it?

SB: My picture begins with an idea which I develop through designs and sketches. After that I begin to paint on burlap. It's a long, demanding process, especially with medium-to-large canvases. It takes me approximately twenty days to complete each painting.

RoF: Where do you get your ideas? Does the local landscape influence you? Italian and Renaissance art history? (Can any Italian artist—or any artist in general—escape the long shadow of the Renaissance?)

SB: Ideas come to me from the daily paper, from everything around me, and also from the landscape. I transform it with irony. It all inspires me. And I also find Flemish painting of the fifteenth century to be *especially* inspirational.

RoF: Are there any modern or contemporary artists who inspire you?

SB: No. As I said, the Flemish artists of 1400 inspire me. I feel that I'm truly a Northern European artist.

RoF: Your subjects are painted in very specific representational

stylizations. But your backgrounds are very abstract, emphasizing texture and color. (For example, in the oil painting *Fronco*, the background is an amazing sunset hue, while the subject is actually rather subdued in coloration.) Why?

SB: I intentionally do this, creating contrast to give more visual value to the subjects.

RoF: Are your fantastic animals proxies or stand-ins for human beings? Do they represent moods and situations as much as they do beings? Where does a picture like *Il Case* (a dog with wheels) come from? *Il Maiale et le Lune? Il Gatto Finito? L'artiste?* Do you dream of these fantastic marvelous animals?

SB: For me the animals represent an aspect of our state of mind as humans. I draw them as partly free and joyful, and partly distorted.

RoF: It seems that you are being both humorous and serious in your work, correct? It seems both a satire on human nature and desire, and yet a gentle affectionate acknowledgement of human frailty.

SB: My work is truly serious and funny at the same time. I do use the animals as a way to shine light on our defects.

RoF: Is there a particular message you are sending in your work?

SB: What I would like to say is that we should look at the world with the eyes of children.

RoF: Are you concerned about ecology? (I'm thinking of your powerful painting "The Seed in the Sky"—*Il Seme in Cielo*.) What message does this painting send?

SB: There's a lot to be worried about. I would like to see a cleaner, healthier world. Honestly, we are destroying it and we don't notice or pretend not to see it. We only think of the next dollar and this will lead us to an inevitable regression in both climate and culture.

RoF: Which painting(s) or series of paintings do you have special fondness for?

SB: I especially like my Bestiary, but I love all my paintings. They're like my children.

RoF: Have you ever illustrated fantasy stories or children's books?

SB: Not yet, but I would be happy to do it.

RoF: Which medium do you prefer, oils, tempera, or watercolor, and why? Do you use the computer, and if so, how much? (For sketches or for finished work?)

SB: I don't have a preference for media. And I have not *ever* used the computer. I will not use it in my work.

RoF: What are you working on now?

SB: I am thinking of next working on the topic "The Tower of Confusion." I would like to paint a canvas of grand dimensions, four or five meters. We'll see if I succeed in bringing this to fruition.

RoF: What are your future projects?

SB: I don't have precise plans, I only want to paint works on various themes that amuse and stimulate the viewer's thought processes.

RoF: Why did you become an artist?

SB: I always have been an artist and always will be. It was born in me. I cannot make another thing besides art.

RoF: What do you enjoy about being an artist?

SB: It appeals to me to be an artist—even if I don't really know what it's like *not* to be one—because I enjoy the mental and physical freedom of it.

RoF: What do you dislike about it?

Books

Paul Witcover
Matt Staggs

Until now, Australian writer Joel Shepherd has been known as a science-fiction writer; his debut trilogy was a smart, fast-moving cyberpunky series featuring Cassandra Kresnov, a genetically engineered assassin on the run from her former masters. With *Sasha: A Trial of Blood & Steel* (Pyr, trade paperback, 424 pp., $16.00, ISBN: 978-1-591-02787-4), Shepherd makes a successful crossover to fantasy, beginning a new series with a compelling female protagonist, Sashandra Lenayin. It's interesting that Shepherd has chosen to give these characters such similar names—are they, perhaps, multiversal aspects of each other, like Moorcock's Eternal Champion? Certainly they share a number of characteristics: both are exiles of a sort, both possess unusual attributes, and both are efficient yet reluctant killers. Both are also forced to grow up in unexpected ways.

The Cassandra series was distinguished by deft characterization and realistically complex world-building. Political machinations were central to its plots, and Shepherd integrated these potentially ponderous elements adroitly—though on occasion his penchant for talk over action caused narrative momentum to flag. All of this holds true for *Sasha*, as well.

Yet despite these commonalities, it would be wrong to conclude that Sashandra's story is simply Cassandra's shifted into a fantastic milieu. Sashandra—or Sasha, as she is known—has her own problems, distinctive to the fantasy world that Shepherd has created: a quasi-medieval setting familiar, if not over-familiar, to fantasy readers, but one to which he brings a refreshing perspective.

The novel takes place in the country of Lenayin, a confederation of culturally and religiously mixed provinces ruled by Great Lords who owe a nominal allegiance to a king—Torvaal Lenayin, who happens to be Sasha's father. Torvaal is something of an absent king—the death of his heir, Sasha's beloved big brother, Krystoff, some years previously, has sent him into an obsessive religious retreat that has allowed his ambitious second son and new heir, Koenyg, to take command, aided by Archbishop Dalryn, a powerful figure in the dominant religion. That religion, followed by the Verenthane, who make up the majority of the nobility, is a stern faith, with roots in kingdoms to the south, that combines pantheism with martial austerity: it's kind of Roman, with bits of early Christianity grafted on. The indigenous inhabitants of the northern provinces of Lenayin are tribal peoples known as Goeren-yai, whose religion is more animistic; little by little, since the establishment of the current social order by Verenthanes who helped to defeat an incursion by the country of Cherrovan, to the north, and then imposed a rule of their own, the Goeren-yai have been relegated to second-class status, until, when *Sasha* opens, there is but a single Goeren-yai great lord, Krayliss. Krayliss has just killed Verenthane Great Lord Rashyd Telgar, and Rashyd's heir, Usyn, now seeks revenge. This pitting of Verenthane against Goeren-yai threatens to unleash a civil war in the north just when Prince Koenyg and Archbishop Dalryn are contemplating a war of faith in the southern kingdom of Bacosh, where a population of inhuman serrin offend the sensibilities of the Verenthane rulers, who look down their noses at their Lenayin coreligionists even as they seek their aid in battle against a formidable foe.

The serrin are almost the only overt element of the fantastic in this novel, and they are presented as natural, rather than magical, beings, despite their physical resemblance to what we would call elves. They are an older race than humans, longer-lived, wiser, and sadder, with knowledge of advanced technologies and lost histories, and with superior physical abilities; they follow no religion but instead a cult of reason and logic—they're like Vulcans, in other words. They have also developed a style of sword fighting known as svaalverd, which, combined with their superior strength, speed, and dexterity, makes them the greatest swordsmen and -women in the world, virtually unbeatable in single combat. Shepherd makes the serrin believably strange yet also sympathetic.

There are humans who seek to emulate the serrin rather than to eliminate them. A tribe called the Nasi-Keth place reason above emotion and they have become adept in the techniques of svaalverd. The greatest practitioner is Kessligh Cronenverdt, a legendary figure who, in his youth, was the right-hand man of the previous Lenayin king. Now Kessligh has retired, and has taken an apprentice—Sasha. For though Verenthane women are cosseted, the traditions among the Goeren-yai and Nasi-Keth are very different, and Sasha, who, from childhood, displayed extraordinary aptitude in svaalverd, when Kessligh came to the palace to tutor Krystoff, has cast off her birthright as Verenthane princess to become something else…something closer to her heart and to her love for the oppressed Goeren-yai.

If Kessligh is the greatest human practitioner of svaalverd, then Sasha is a close second. And now her blood connection to the Lenayin kingship and nobility will be brought into stark contrast with the naïvely heroic impulses of her heart as she is drawn into the brewing civil war…and the other war in the south.

Though she herself has no prejudice against the serrin, indeed admires them, she will face a harsh choice, based on family loyalties, when she learns that her pampered sister, Sofy, is being wooed by a duke of the serrin-hating Bacosh. At the same time, she will find herself in the unsought position of championing the Goeren-yai, even though that puts her not only in conflict with her family but perilously close to treason. Shepherd throws what seems to be a romantic interest into this mix—a dashing young prince, Jaryd Nyvar, but Nyvar grows into a powerful and poignant character in his own right.

The gritty realism and political intrigue will remind readers of George R. R. Martin's Song of Ice and Fire series, though Shepherd is not Martin's equal as a writer. Indeed, the first hundred pages of *Sasha,* in which Shepherd meticulously lays out what I have sought to convey in a few paragraphs above, is very slow going, at times downright tedious. But patient readers will be amply rewarded, because once the novel begins to move, it relentlessly picks up speed. Sasha's torturous path to maturity, complete with painful missteps, is sensitively conveyed, and while I definitely cheered for her, I also found myself arguing with her—and in a way, that's a higher compliment to pay an author.

Pyr is bringing out these novels, already published in Australia, in swift succession. The second book, *Petrodor*, will likely be on the shelves by the time you are reading this. Go pick it up—I know I will.

N. K. Jemisin makes an impressive debut with *The Hundred Thousand Kingdoms* (Orbit, trade paperback, 432 pp., $13.99, ISBN: 978-1-316-04391-5), the first in a trilogy set in a universe whose gods are so much a part of everyday life that they might almost be thought of as mundane—were it not for their violent emotions and dangerously destructive powers. This is one of those fantasies that, like certain mystery novels, depends on an elaborate backstory whose details are gradually released to readers and to the main character, who suffers either from amnesia or just a general lack of knowledge: the slow revelation of missing information constitutes a hefty

chunk of the plot, imparting a backward flow to the narrative that can clash with its natural forward progression to give an impression of stasis, as if the narrative isn't advancing, exactly, but instead filling in its missing pieces, like some paint-by-numbers exercise. The result is apt to be less a living and breathing work of fiction than a cold, if beautiful, artifact, with the main character more a receptacle than an actor.

But *The Hundred Thousand Kingdoms* avoids this fate, thanks to Jemisin's vivid characterizations, as well as to the sensuality and poetry of her prose. The secrets of the past are definitely important to the fate of Jemisin's heroine, nineteen-year-old Yeine Darr, but her struggle to acknowledge those secrets in her own terms, refusing to let them dictate what her destiny will be, makes her a highly sympathetic character.

Yeine is the ennu, or chieftain, of a small matriarchy known as Darr; her father, now deceased, was the son of its previous chieftain, Yeine's grandmother. Yeine's mother, Kinneth, also deceased, was the daughter of Dekarta Arameri, the ruler of a loose-knit empire holding sway over the entire world. When Kinneth married so far beneath her station, she gave up her birthright, forcing her father, whose wife was dead and who had no other children, to look elsewhere for an heir. Thus, as the novel opens, Yeine finds herself summoned to Sky, the capital city of the empire.

There she learns to her confusion and dismay that her grandfather—whom she has never met—intends to name her as one of his heirs. Apparently, the succession involves a competition among rival heirs…a competition to the death. This is Yeine's introduction to vicious Scimina and dissolute Relad, her fellow heirs and distant relations—as, indeed, is everyone in the entire city of Sky, from the nobles to the servants. The Arameri clan is a large one!

What gives the clan its authority and power is its possession of four weapons: four gods enslaved to the emperor, compelled to obey his every order, and, to a lesser extent, the orders of other full-blood Arameris. Although Yeine is technically a half-blood, she gains the privileges of full-blood status when Dekarta picks her as heir.

How did humans come to have power over gods? The answer to this question, which is intimately wrapped up in the plot of the novel and Yeine's destiny, lies at the beginning of the universe. From that beginning was born Itempas, the Skyfather, Lord of Light. He was followed some time later by Nahadoth, the Nightlord. For eons, these two gods fought each other relentlessly…and then became lovers, only to fight again, and then reconcile, a pattern they followed until the arrival of a third divinity, Enefa, goddess of the balance, of the gray places between black and white. This trio of sibling gods gave birth to all things, including humans, and other gods like themselves but less powerful. But at some point, Enefa turned against Itempas and betrayed him; Nahadoth sided with her, as did a number of the other gods. In this war of the gods, Itempas was victorious. Enefa was killed, and Nahadoth and three other gods were locked in mortal frames of flesh and blood and sentenced to serve the chief priest of Itempas, Shahar Arameri, and his descendents, until such time as they would beg for the forgiveness of Itempas. The four fallen gods—who call themselves the Enefadeh, or "lovers of Enefa"—show no inclination to do this. They are, in addition to Nahadoth, Sieh, a trickster god who takes the form of a boy, Zhakkarn, the Goddess of Battle and Bloodshed, and Kurue, the Wise. These all-but-omnipotent beings have become

the playthings of decadent Arameri, used as sex slaves or to settle scores among themselves, as well as to keep the Arameri clan in power.

But the Enefadeh have plans of their own, and Yeine is central to them. All Arameri living in Sky have a magical mark tattooed upon their foreheads to render them safe from the depredations of the Enefadeh and to indicate their status in the hierarchy and the degree to which they can command the Enefadeh. But Yeine receives a different mark from the hand of Zhakkarn, a mark visible only to the gods, though Yeine remains ignorant of its purpose.

As she is of many things. Her mother did not prepare her for the casual and cultured viciousness of court life, where alliances are matters of temporary expedience and betrayal is inevitable. Yet Yeine is strong, the product of a matriarchal culture in which women are warriors and leaders, and despite her confusion and fear, she does not surrender. Instead, she begins to seek out information about her mother—and this information, which always comes at a cost, sometimes in blood, gradually reveals a woman so different from the kind and considerate woman who raised her as to be a stranger.

At the same time, two of the Enefadeh tease, tempt, and torment Yeine with offers of information and dangerous sexual passion—childlike Sieh, who despite his appearance is almost as old as the universe, and Nahadoth, whose vampiric sensuality is only enhanced by the violent madness that afflicts him at every sunset. Nahadoth and Sieh relate a very different narrative of how they came to be enslaved, and Yeine slowly comes to suspect that much of what she has always believed—about her parents, about the gods, about herself—is wrong. Yet she knows that no one in Sky is to be trusted, least of all the Enefadeh. Even her own desires seem likely to betray her.

Jemisin structures this novel in a somewhat convoluted and confusing way, but if readers give her the benefit of the doubt, all will be made clear. Yeine, as noted, is a strong and sympathetic character, and Nahadoth has that gothic vibe going for him, but my heart was won by Sieh, whose capriciousness is both endearing and alarming. My only quibble is that the gods who remained

loyal to Itempas, and are said to still inhabit the heavens, are strangely absent from the book, even at the end, when their presence would seem to be logically indicated, although I can't say more about that without straying into spoiler territory. Perhaps this talented young writer will rectify that omission in the next installment of her trilogy.

Carol Berg's *The Spirit Lens* (Roc, trade paperback, 464 pp., $16.00, ISBN: 978-0-451-46311-1), the first novel in the Collegia Magica trilogy, is another book that depends on the main character piecing together a fragmented, forgotten backstory. This "story of magic and murder," as one character terms it, grafts an inventive if somewhat belabored magical system and traditional pseudo-medieval fantasy setting onto a standard mystery plot: it's got a bit of a *Name of the Rose* vibe to it, though it doesn't aspire to—or reach—those heights. Instead, it's a solid, workmanlike exercise with few real surprises, but no major disappointments either.

Magic is on the wane in the country of Sabria, and too many of its citizens, including King Philippe de Savin-Journia, that's no bad thing. Less than two hundred years ago, a war of magicians nearly destroyed the whole country and wiped out many of the leading magical families. According to the most commonly accepted theory, magic involves the manipulation of five elements—wood, water, spark, air, base metal—by adepts whose abilities are mysteriously rooted in the blood; only certain bloodlines are capable of wielding magic at all, and having the right blood is no guarantee of success, as Berg's narrator and main character, a failed magician named Portier de Savin-Duplais, has learned to his deep and lasting sorrow. However, having the right blood can be very wrong indeed, for unscrupulous sorcerers can increase the potency of their own magic by using the blood of another, whether willfully granted or not, and the abuse of this now-illegal and generally fatal method, known as blood transference, is what sparked the so-called Blood Wars, from which the profession of magic has not yet recovered...and, in fact, may never recover.

The king and those of his party now put their faith in science and reason instead of magic. Robbed of royal patronage, the once-extensive system of magical colleges in the country has dwindled to but one, the Camarilla Magica, where Portier, a distant relative of the king, serves as curator of archives. Yet after the king survives an assassination attempt whose traces indicate a magical component, Philippe feels he has no choice but to turn to the world of magic for a solution to the mystery—and, incidentally, to clear his queen, a staunch believer in the old magical ways, of all suspicion—before the assassins strike again. Thus it is that Portier receives a summons and a mission.

To aid him in uncovering the identity of the assassins and preventing another attempt—as well as in locating the king's friend, Michel de Vernase, who vanished after being taxed by the king with solving the same mystery—Portier, a studious, guilt-ridden young man with a violent, half-forgotten secret in his past, is to receive the help of the queen's half-brother, the Chevalier Ilario de Sylvae, an outrageous dandy who, for some reason, the king trusts implicitly. Portier has no choice but to accept the help of this ridiculous fop. But he also enlists a more potent ally, a surly magician known as Dante, who carries a chip on his shoulder toward all aristocrats but nevertheless agrees to help when shown one of the clues recovered after the failed assassination: a spyglass that seems to pierce the veil between life and death.

Young Adult Fantasy Books

by Michael Jones

***Ice*, by Sarah Beth Durst, McElderry Books, hardcover, 308pp., $16.99, ISBN 978-1-416-98643-0**

Growing up in an Arctic research station with her father, Cassie can't imagine living anywhere else. No wonder that, when she turns eighteen and is told it's time to go off to college, she immediately rejects the idea, preferring to stay where she is. Defying her father, she sets out into the wilderness to track the mythical Polar Bear King. Finding him, she discovers she was promised as his bride years ago, and that her mother isn't dead, but was stolen by the North Wind. Now, to save her mother, Cassie must accept the impossible and choose a life of magic and strangeness. To her surprise, she falls for the Polar Bear King, only to lose him when she inadvertently breaks a promise. If she wants him back, she'll have to go on an epic quest over the unforgiving, stark beauty of the Arctic. Durst's retelling of "East o' the Sun, West o' the Moon" infuses a classic fairy tale with a mythological spirit and a modern perspective, making this a worthy update to the original.

***Lips Touch: Three Times*, by Laini Taylor and illustrated by Jim Di Bartolo, Arthur A. Levine Books, hardcover, 270pp., $17.99, ISBN 978-0-545-05585-7**

Kissing is the underlying theme of these three novellas, as Taylor weaves a set of stories highly reminiscent of Tanith Lee's Flat Earth series. "Goblin Fruit" is a literal and metaphorical descendant of Christina Rossetti's "Goblin Market," in which a young woman's yearning to escape the reach of her old-fashioned family draws the attention of beings who feed on such desires. "Spicy Little Curses Such as These" focuses on a woman in India cursed with a voice that can kill all within earshot, courtesy of a spiteful demon. Will she risk killing everyone she knows, to voice her true feelings, just

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Twylgalit...sent by the trees to find a champion
Rafi...a young gryphon allergic to magic
Jody Burns...wants to get back to shopping at the mall
What can you do when not even the trees listen?
"...a great read for teens who love fantasy."
- Gretchen, Fallen Angel Reviews
There are talking trees, dryads and magical powers... Great fun!" - Lesley, Eternal Night
Talking To Trees
Kathryn Sullivan
Agents & Adepts
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once? In "Hatchling," a girl discovers the link between her mother's nomadic tendencies and the fate of an ancient race of immortals, much to her dismay. Written with a darkly romantic tone, filled with lush descriptions and fleshed out by Di Bartolo's exquisite illustrations, this collection haunts long after the last page is turned.

***Beautiful Creatures*, by Kami Garcia & Margaret Stohl, Little, Brown Books for Young Readers, hardcover, 565pp., $17.99, ISBN 978-0-316-04267-3**

Although he's never met her before, Ethan Wate instantly recognizes Lena Duchannes, the strange new girl in town, as the literal girl of his dreams. The two are drawn together, even as their respective families and the rest of the small town of Gatlin inexplicably frown upon the fledgling relationship. Matters are further complicated as Lena reveals that she, like the rest of her family, has magical abilities, and when she turns sixteen, she'll either stay good, or turn evil…and the choice isn't up to her, due to events dating back to the Civil War. Haunted by the dreams of their ancestors, stalked by dark forces, and caught up in a race against time, Ethan and Lena must delve into Gatlin's secret history and break a powerful curse if their relationship is to stand a chance. Southern Gothic meets Nina Kiriki Hoffman in this complex, gripping tale of love, ghosts, magic, and destiny.

***The Doom Machine*, by Mark Teague, The Blue Sky Press, hardcover, 376pp., $17.99, ISBN 978-0-545-15142-9**

When the rapacious aliens known as Skreeps land in the sleepy town of Vern Hollow in 1956 in search of an invention which will grant them unparalleled power, it's the start of a surreal galaxy-spanning adventure for mechanically gifted Jack Creedle and the brilliant Isadora Shumway. Kidnapped along with several other humans, they have to thwart the Skreeps, survive a flying saucer crash, trek across a hostile alien surface, and prevent a full-fledged invasion. No problem. Fast, witty, and wacky, *The Doom Machine* reads like Daniel Pinkwater mixed with classic '50s B-movie sensibilities, peppered with Teague's crisply suitable illustrations. What's not to love in a book where a cranky rooster plays a pivotal role?

***The Shifter* (Book One of the Healing Wars), by Janice Hardy, Balzar & Bray, hardcover, 370pp., $16.99, ISBN 978-0-061-74704-5**

Nya has a gift, and a curse. Like all Takers, she can heal with a touch, drawing the suffering into her own body. But instead of shifting the pain into pynvium, a metal capable of storing it for future use, she can only pass it on to other people, an aspect of her power she's loathe to use. Scrounging to survive on the streets, incapable of joining the Healers' League due to her flaws, Nya's worst fears are realized when the discovery of her talent makes her the target of those who would exploit her for harm and profit. Now, to save her sister, her friends, and herself, she must discover the shocking secrets hidden in the League Healers' citadel, even as her moral and ethical limits are sorely tested. Set in the middle of a war, with racial tensions high and trouble around every corner, this is a thought-provoking, powerful debut for Hardy.

***Lockdown: Escape from Furnace*, by Alexander Gordon Smith, Farrar, Straus and Giroux, hardcover, 273pp., $14.99, ISBN 978-0-374-32491-9**

Petty thief Alex Sawyer's latest heist turns tragic and life-altering when he's interrupted by a set of mysterious men who kill his best friend and frame him for the murder. Victim of Britain's new zero-tolerance policy, he's sentenced to life in Furnace, a bizarre, inhumane prison located a mile underground. Now he has to contend with vicious youth gangs, horrifying jailors, and the disturbing secrets of the world's deadliest penitentiary, where death is nowhere near the worst thing that can happen. Alex will escape, or die trying. This nightmarish start to a new series is unrelentingly bleak, uniquely horrifying, and strangely compelling.

***The Seven Rays*, by Jessica Bendinger, Simon & Schuster, hardcover, 328pp., $16.99, ISBN 978-1-416-93839-2**

Beth Michaels's life is thrown into utter chaos when she starts receiving enigmatic gold envelopes containing cryptic messages, even as she starts seeing weird phenomena corresponding to people's emotions and thoughts. Things only get worse as her quest for answers first lands her in a psychiatric facility, then takes her to New York City, where she discovers her true heritage, the sisters she never knew she had, and a prophesied destiny she's not sure she wants. While the ideas, which combine a variety of philosophies and beliefs, are interesting, the execution is haphazard and the characterization unsteady. Bendinger, better known for her girl-power movie scripts (*Bring It On*, *Stick It*), starts strong but falters along the way. Hopefully future installments will help her reach her potential.

Michael M. Jones, writer and book reviewer, lives in Roanoke, VA, with a herd of cats, a vast mountain of books, and a very patient wife. He's sworn not to die until he's finished reading his backlog of books. His ever-growing archive of reviews can be found at www.michaelmjones.com.

Dante has unorthodox views about magic. He scoffs at the theory of the five elements and instead fills Portier's head with heretical ideas about fields of magic or energy underlying all objects and things—fields accessible to and alterable by sorcerers via a kind of sympathetic attunement. Really, Berg is taking some currently popular notions of quantum consciousness and quantum entanglement that are based on misunderstandings of science and on good old-fashioned wishful thinking and applying them to magic…and why not? It's where they belong. What troubles Portier most about Dante's ideas is not that they are heretical, however, but that they seem to be correct, thus throwing his entire belief system into upheaval. If Dante is right, then magic has not been waning from the world at all, but is actually as present as it ever was…just inaccessible to those who approach it in the wrong way. Perhaps Portier, who has never gotten over his failure to become a mage, can have a second chance now.

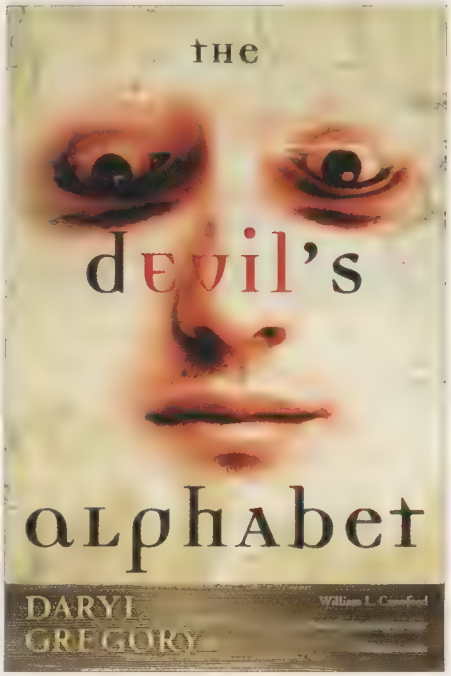
The queen has two household mages, both of whom Portier considers suspects. The queen's attraction to magic seems rooted in personal loss—the deaths of her parents and her child. But her grief may have led her, or her mages, into the proscribed magics of blood transference and necromancy. Could it have also led her to plot the murder of her husband?

Portier is something of a cold fish, and I confess I never really warmed to him as I did to the popinjay Ilario and the curmudgeonly, unpleasant, occasionally violent, and quite possibly mad Dante. As a detective, he's second-rate at best, missing clues that any moderately intelligent person would catch, which, as a moderately intelligent person, I found annoying and difficult to credit. At such moments it's clear that Berg is forcing the issue for reasons of plot. But on the whole, it's not so much the mysteries or the magic that will keep readers turning these pages as it is the characters and their relationships, especially the emotionally fraught father/son, teacher/student relationship that develops between Portier and Dante, which promises to be a major component of the second volume. ☙

Paul Witcover is the author of the novels *Waking Beauty*, *Tumbling After*, and *Dracula: Asylum*, and the collection *Everland*. He is also the author of *Zora Neale Hurston*, a biography. He lives on the edge of Green-Wood Cemetery in Brooklyn, New York.

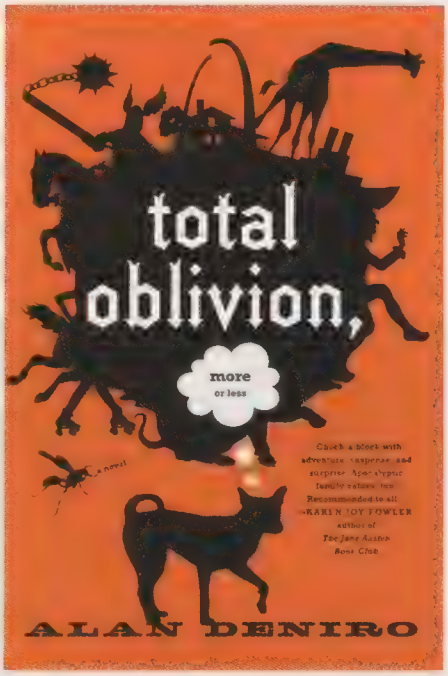
***The Devil's Alphabet*, Daryl Gregory, Del Rey, trade paperback, 400 pp., $15.00, ISBN: 978-0-345-50117-2**

Almost twenty years ago the residents of Switchcreek, Tennessee, were



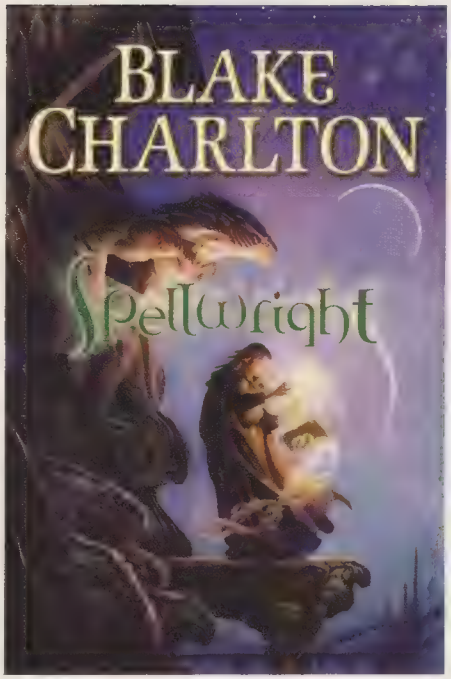
stricken with Transcription Divergence Syndrome, a mysterious new disease that killed nearly everyone who contracted it and transformed those who survived into unrecognizable monstrosities: giant, stony "Argos"; bald, red-skinned, asexual "Betas"; and fleshy "Charlies," whose skins ooze powerful psychogenic drugs called "vintage." Paxton Martin was only a teenager at the time, a "skip," one of a few who didn't contract the disease. His parents weren't so lucky. His father, the town's pastor, became a Charlie and his mother died from the disease. Shortly thereafter a falling-out with his father saw Paxton leaving Switchcreek and its troubles behind for a quiet life in Chicago. When Paxton returns home for a friend's funeral he learns that Switchcreek is a town with secrets, and when that friend's death starts to look less like suicide and more like murder he wonders how far its citizens would go to keep those secrets. Seemingly at the center of it all is "Aunt Rhonda," a Charlie whose down-home demeanor and Southern charm barely hides the iron grip she holds on both her fellow Charlies and the town as a whole. Most suspicious is the nursing home Rhonda runs for the older Charlie men. These seniors require their vintage to be drained regularly lest they become psychotic and dangerous, but what is Rhonda doing with it all? Paxton's investigation takes a desperate turn when he becomes addicted to his own bed-bound father's vintage. *The Devil's Alphabet* again showcases Gregory's talent for drawing inspiration from rock songs and comic books and employing it in new and inventive ways, and similarly, using these fantastic milieus to explore deeper questions about family and community. While there are a few loose ends still left hanging by the end of the story, the journey is entertaining enough along the way that most readers should be willing to overlook them.

***Total Oblivion, More or Less*, Alan DeNiro, Bantam Spectra, trade paperback, 320 pp., $15.00, ISBN: 978-0-553-59254-2**



Adolescence is a tough time for anyone, but for sixteen-year-old Macy, the heroine of Alan DeNiro's *Total Oblivion, More or Less*, it is a complete disaster. Her home state of Minnesota is under attack by...well, everything. Even worse, the

craziness that has struck the North Star State might be happening everywhere and that life for Macy and her family may never be the same. The very landscape itself is twisting and veering off into new and unpredictable directions. Rivers widen and deepen, becoming home to whales, submarines, and stranger things yet. Borders start to blur, and as old boundaries disappear new city-states burst into being. Technological devices cease to work, work sporadically, or even work in new and random ways. Life, never a predictable or stable thing at the best of times, has become completely free of science and logic. Entering the fray are horse-riding barbarians—bloodthirsty Scythians come to plunder—and their enemies, the Imperials, a branch of the Roman Empire that means to bring its own version of *Pax Romana* to battle-torn America. Meanwhile, a strange new plague is burning through the population. It strikes its victims with blisters and buboes filled with bizarre symbols and ancient icons, and may or may not be spread by wasps. The disease threatens Americans, Scythians, and Imperials alike, all of whom are at a loss to explain where the disease comes from and how it might be cured. Macy and her family are evicted from their home by the Imperial army and sent packing to a refugee camp, and it isn't long before they decide to take their chances out in the world. Rumors of an impending Scythian attack, and a possible job opportunity for Macy's father, an astronomer, prompts them all to buy passage on a southbound riverboat.



Close quarters and collapsing social norms lead the children to sense that their childhoods are over, and that their parents can no longer protect them. Ciaran, the youngest, headstrong and amoral, seems perfectly adapted to life in this new and unpredictable world—maybe a little too well-adapted. His connection to the rest of the family, already tenuous, threatens to snap completely. His closest companion is a sinister-looking dog, and he spends most of his time gambling and carousing with soldiers. Sophia, the oldest, looks at her new life as an opportunity and can't wait to leave the last remnants of her childhood behind. Macy, the middle child, just wants things to get back to whatever counts as normal these days. Forces within and without test their family bond, the only stable thing any of them have anymore. *Total Oblivion, More or Less* is a wildly imaginative piece of slipstream storytelling, an acid-drenched *Huckleberry Finn* that will both delight and baffle readers with a taste for the literary bizarre.

***Spellwright*, Blake Charlton, Tor, hardcover, 352 pp., $24.99, ISBN: 978-0-765-31727-8**

As an apprentice Spellwright, Nicodemus Weal is a disaster. He's a Cacographer, a special kind of magician with the dubious gift of being able to warp and destroy magical script with the slightest touch. Words in this world have magical power, and editing the order of such a script can be disastrous. Cacographers, with training, can harness their abilities in order to aid proper mages in their research, but even this meager goal starts to slip from Weal's grasp when his master becomes the prime suspect in a magical murder. Meanwhile several magical sects have turned their attention to Weal himself as the possible fulfillment of a prophecy feared by some and eagerly awaited by others: the arrival of a Cacographer who is destined to bring about the destruction of the magical establishment. *Spellwright* is a well-crafted epic fantasy that mines the author's own experiences living with dyslexia, for a new twist on a classic story, and like Weal himself, Charlton has managed to turn what some might consider a curse into a powerful gift. ☙

—Matt Staggs

Graphic Novels
by Andrew Wheeler

So far, this column has primarily focused on graphic novels by North Americans—but that's only one piece of the world of comics-format fantasy. So, this time out, I wanted to run through some comics from other parts of the world—*manga* and *manwha* from Japan and Korea. All of these are first volumes, for maximum new-reader friendliness, but they're also all good examples of wider trends and tendencies.

***This Ugly Yet Beautiful World, Vol. 1*, Original Story by Gainax/Konomini Project, Art by Ashita Morimi, Tokyopop, paperback, 238pp, $10.99, ISBN 978-1427814258**

In Japan, *manga* are sometimes at the center of vast media empires—and, even when the comic version didn't come first, it's usually connected to some other media. *This Ugly Yet Beautiful World* was first an animated TV series, and then was turned into a comic. That may partially explain the large cast of *Ugly*, which is hard to keep straight, particularly in black and white. (Though at least they don't wear school uniforms all the time—in some series, you need to pay careful attention to girls' hairstyles to be sure who is who.)

Ugly is a wish-fulfillment story for boys; two teenagers witness what looks like a

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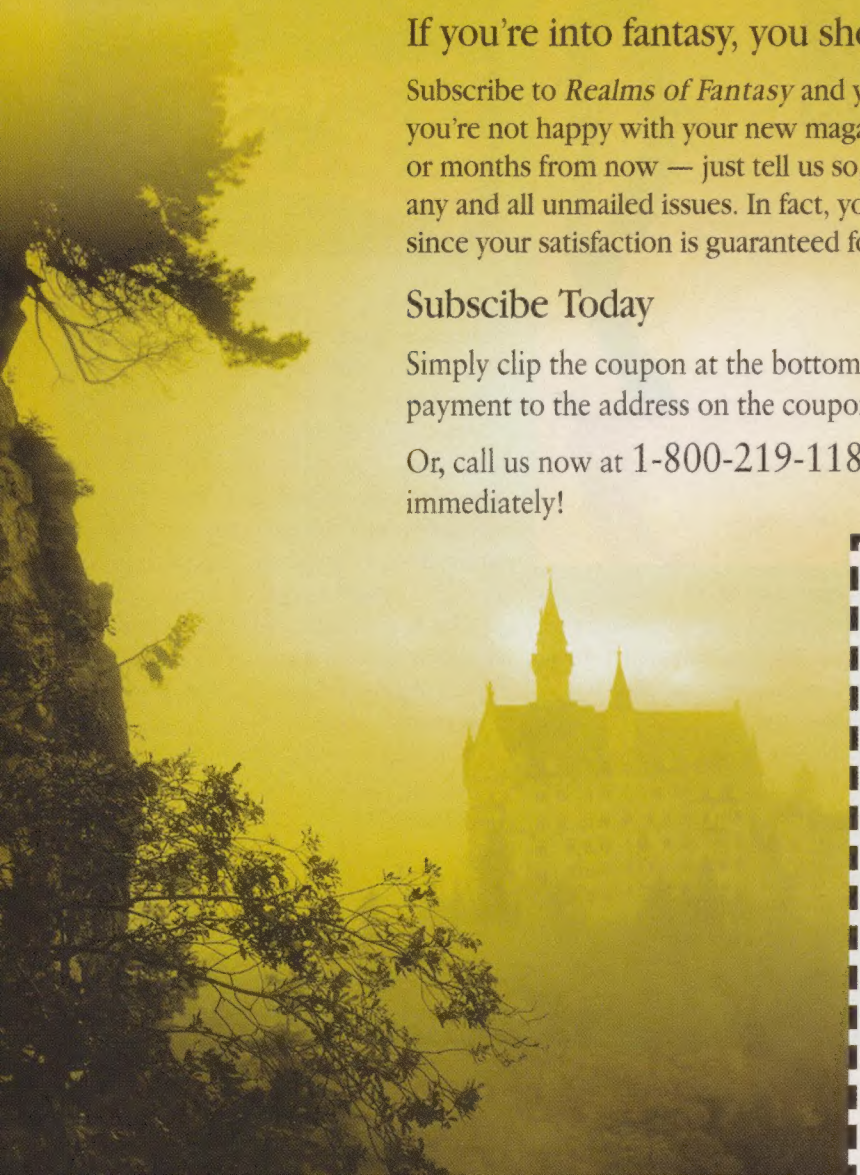

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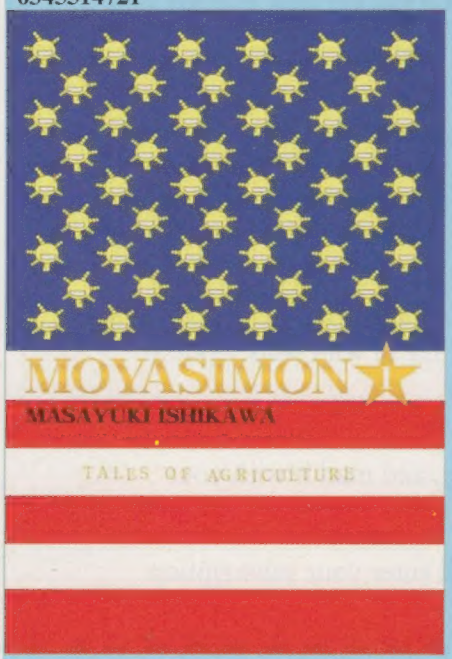
falling star, which passes through them while they're riding on a motorcycle, then splits into two parts. Both of the parts turn out to be gorgeous, frequently naked girls, who know nothing about the world and each fall in "love" with one of the boys. This causes tension with the local girls, and there are hints by the end of this volume that the star-girls may not be as innocent and harmless as they seem. But *Ugly* is most notable for that copious nudity, particularly as "fanservice"—unlikely poses and situations aimed purely at the reader. The story itself isn't leering, though, which is also pretty common; Japanese comics have a very different set of expectations for sexuality in their stories.

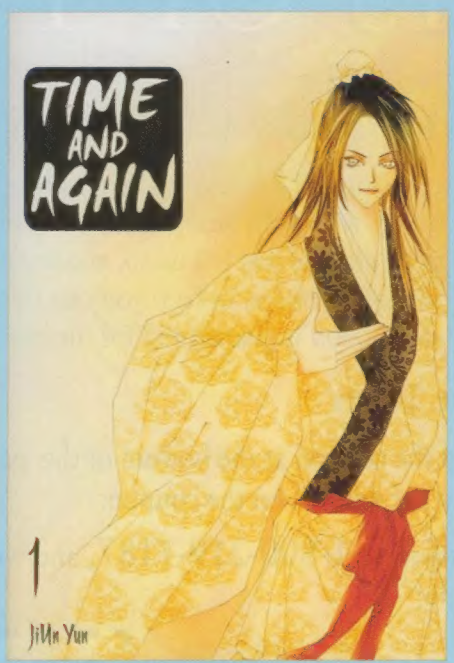
***Moyasimon 1: Tales of Agriculture*, by Masayuki Ishikawa, Del Rey Manga, paperback, 222pp, $10.99, ISBN 978-0345514721**



In the US, the scope of commercial comics narrowed severely over the second half of the twentieth century, leaving superheroes and little else—it has broadened out somewhat recently, but American comics shops still have the look of a monoculture. In Japan, the scope of *manga* never was limited in the same way—though *manga* publishing does channel projects into categories by audience, and superficially different stories turn out to be very similar, meaning that there are stories about superpowered teenagers, yes, but also less obvious things.

Take *Moyasimon*, the story of a young man at a fictional agricultural college. Tadayasu does have something like a superpower: he can see germs with his naked eyes. This does not lead to exciting adventures, but instead—in something like a Japanese version of one of those *Popeye* educational comics—to lectures on the useful (and dangerous) properties of many bacteria, along with a so-far-minor plot about using Tadayasu's abilities to either get really rich or do complicated scientific research. *Moyasimon* is much talkier than any similar Western comic would be, but Ishikawa makes the various bacteria cute and even the long stretches of explanatory dialogue are interesting. It's a comic not just *about* aggies, but largely *for* them.

***Time and Again, Vol. 1*, by JiUn Yun, Yen Press, paperback, 158pp, $10.99, ISBN 978-0759530584**

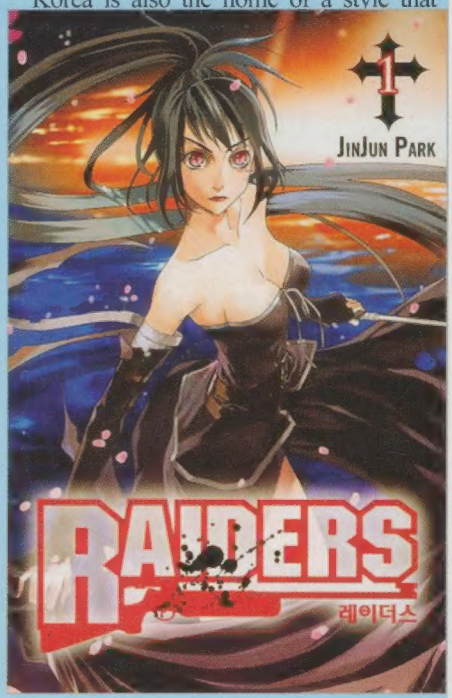


South Korean comics, or *manwha*, can be physically easier to read for a Westerner, since the Korean language reads left-to-right, like English, with pages and panels that flow in the same direction as American comics. But, after an initial orientation period, it's not the physical storytelling that's the real barrier in *manga* or *manwha*, but the culture of the story itself.

For example, *Time and Again* is the story of a pair of exorcists-for-hire in Classical China, and depends heavily on the reader's knowledge of Chinese mythology and history. It's thoughtful, often spooky, and deeply atmospheric, but it can also be opaque if the reader doesn't understand the cultural significance of a ghost, or pick up on the subtle social cues from the supporting cast. *Time and Again* is a fine series, but probably best left for advanced *manwha* readers.

***Raiders, Vol. 1*, by JinJun Park, Yen Press, paperback, 166pp, $10.99, ISBN 978-0759530492**

Korea is also the home of a style that



Japan—and a fair number of superhero-decadence artists here in the US—have excelled in over the years: the story of sudden, overwhelming ultra-violence.

Raiders is doubly fun from a cultural standpoint, since it's one of those books that gleefully appropriates the religious symbolism of a foreign culture for its own adventure-story purposes—in this case, our young hero steals a vial containing the blood of Christ, and (after fighting an immortal cannibal zombie woman) *drinks it to save his life and make himself immortal*. It's pulpy, high-energy entertainment, with speed lines going in every direction, and more mysterious factions and weirdly powered people than you can shake a stick at. I'm not entirely sure it's completely coherent, but it's the kind of book you just strap into and ride—the kind of pure kinetic fun that Asian comics are so good at.

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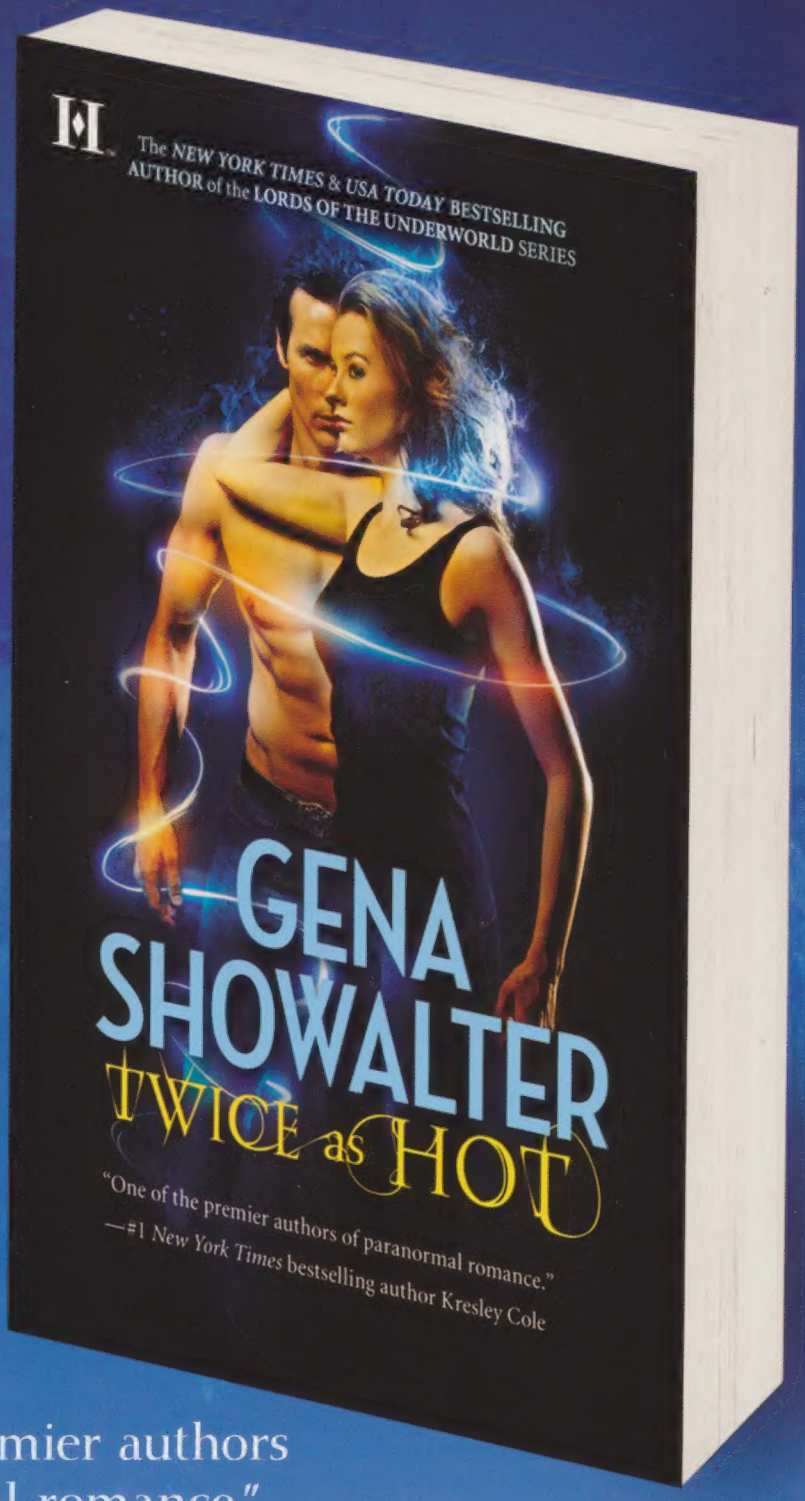
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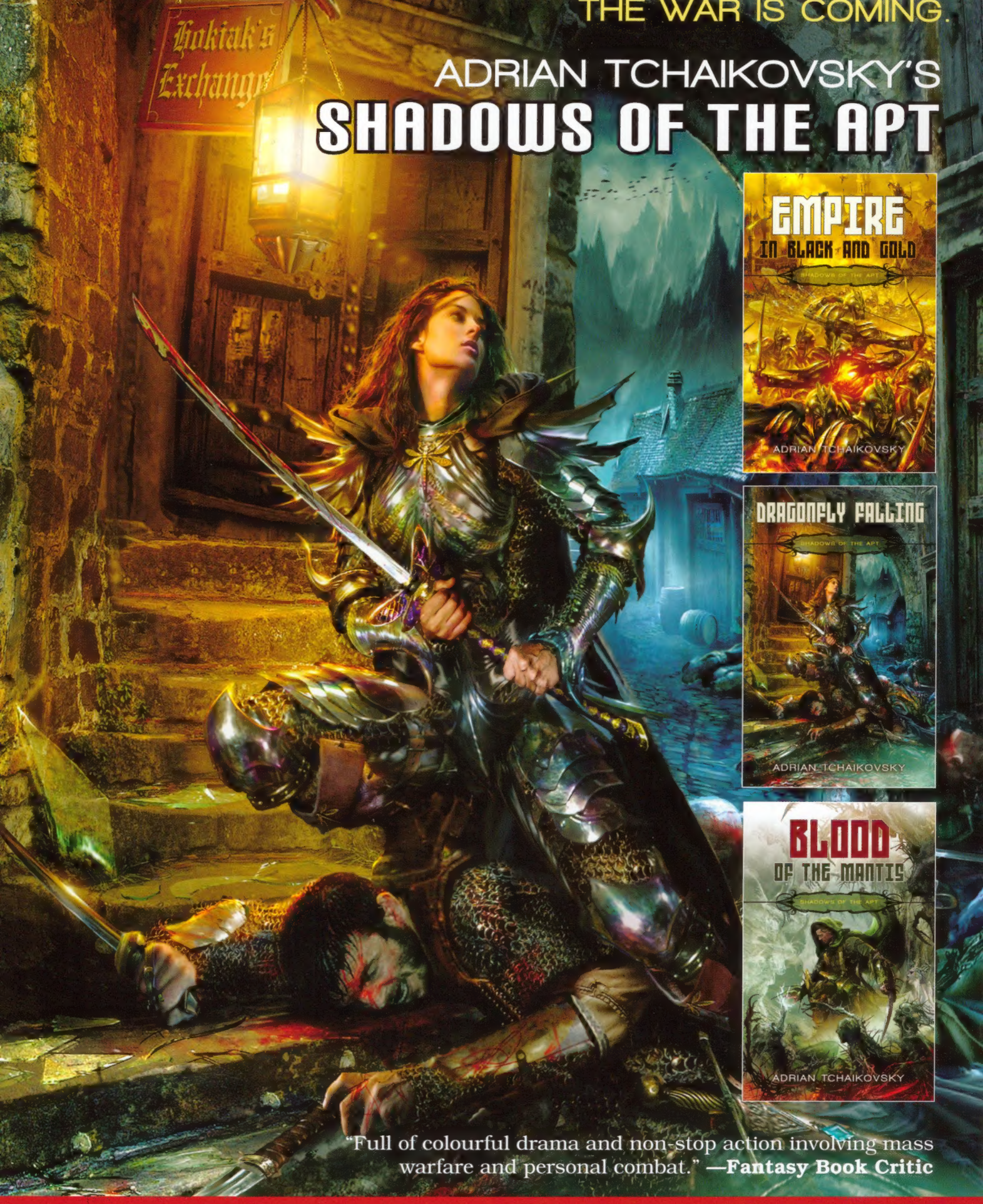
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